

# I get mail . . .

I received the following today, which succinctly summarizes questions I have been asked numerous times in recent years:

*Dear Sir,*

*Just curious about how you can be a part of ACNA which endorses and embraces innovations to doctrine and discipline that seem to make the Assumption and IC rather more forgivable- i.e. ordination of women, theology of the 1979 BCP, etc. Thanks for your website.*

*Sincerely, Fr. \_\_\_\_\_*

My response follows:

Fr. \_\_\_\_\_,

Your question is too short to answer without knowing what specific objections you have in mind, and on what basis you object.

I am enough of an Anglican to follow Richard Hooker in his distinction between matters of doctrine and morals (which are unchangeable) and matters of church practice and polity (which, under certain circumstances can be).

So the 1979 BCP is a matter of church practice and polity, a fallible human document, as was the 1549 BCP, the 1552 BCP, the 1559 BCP, the 1662 BCP, the American 1928 BCP, the Roman Catholic Tridentine rite and the Novus Ordo. Cranmer's Prayer Book captured well the Reformed Catholic theology of the English Reformation, but, as a document of its time, it shared many of the problematic assumptions of late Medieval spirituality and theology that were common then. The 1979 BCP, whatever its weaknesses, was largely a product of the liturgical renewal movement of the mid-twentieth century, which, as a movement of its time, also shared in many of the

problematic assumptions of the mid-twentieth century. Nonetheless, the liturgical renewal movement also got a lot of things right, and the 1979 BCP, while not infallible, was, in some definite ways, an improvement on Cranmer.

The ACNA does not, however, regard the 1979 BCP as without problems. I am a consultant to the Liturgical Taskforce of the ACNA, and the Committee is now working on what will be a long term project of producing a new Prayer Book. The Committee has already produced a new Ordinal, which corrects what we regard as some of the defects of the 1979 Ordinal, and it is now being used exclusively for ordinations in the ACNA. The Committee's current task is to produce a new baptismal rite, which will, in time, replace the 1979 rite. However, this is going to be a lengthy and piecemeal process. Until the new Prayer Book is produced, congregations are free to use any of the traditional Prayer Books (including the 1979), recognizing that none of them are infallible, but something is better than nothing, and it is impossible to produce a new Prayer Book out of thin air. Neither will the ACNA's new Prayer Book be without fault.

In addition, I am also a recent member of the Catechetical Task Force, whose goal is to produce a Catechesis that will be creedal, rooted in Scripture, and draw on the history of catechetical practice and earlier catechisms (not only Protestant, but also the current Roman Catholic Catechism) as well as recent catechetical scholarship. We believed that a more robust catechetical formation will do much to creating Christian disciples, as opposed to mere pew sitters.

The question of Women's Ordination is a different, although related question. I do not have time to address it in a short reply, but I would say that WO is far from the clear cut black and white issue that its opponents make it out to be. It is entirely a different matter from such issues as homosexual practice (which is clearly and univocally condemned)

throughout the Bible, or central creedal dogmas (the Trinity, the incarnation, the bodily resurrection of Christ) that are necessary implications of the plain reading of Scripture. The question of WO is, then, a question of whether or not this practice (like the practice of creating a liturgy in English) falls within the freedom of the church, or whether there is something inherent to the ontology of ordination that makes the ordination of women impossible. That is a theological question, and not one that can be addressed simply by pointing to previous practice.

As for the Assumption and IC, these are dogmas (not matters of church polity and practice). They have no basis in a plain sense reading of Scripture, nor are they, like the Nicene and Chalcedonian dogmas, necessary implications of what Scripture teaches. Moreover, as historical developments, they are separated from the apostolic period by centuries. As such, it is implausible to argue that they are the products of an unbroken unwritten tradition.

Finally, I believe that the church has been given the task of guarding the Apostolic Deposit of Faith. At the same time, we are successors to the apostles, not apostles. As such, the church is not infallible. This gives a certain freedom. It allows that the church has made mistakes in the past, and will necessarily make mistakes in the future. But it also means that such mistakes are, at least in principle, correctible.

Grace and Peace,

Bill Witt

P.S. By coincidence, I also receive today a copy of an inquiry addressed to the Liturgical Committee by a lay person who was concerned that the new ACNA Prayer Book might be guilty of teaching the heretical Roman Catholic doctrine of baptismal regeneration. To the contrary, I would argue that "baptismal regeneration" is the historic doctrine of Anglicanism. It was

clearly embraced by the Anglican Reformers, and is the teaching of the historic Prayer Books, 1549, 1552, 1559, 1662, and American 1928.

Given Fr. \_\_\_\_\_ 's apparent affirmation of the Assumption and Immaculate Conception, I would doubt that he would have any objections to baptismal regeneration. Nonetheless, as the contrast between these two inquiries (both arriving on the same day) makes clear, it is impossible to make everyone happy all the time.

---

## 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* (Westminster John Knox, 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 -illuminated 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.

---

## **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.

---

## **Thomas Aquinas on the Formal Sufficiency of Scripture**



Dr. Michael Liccione has responded to my post on the distinction between formal and informal sufficiency of Scripture, and specifically objects to my reading that Thomas Aquinas subscribes to a “formal sufficiency” of Scripture. By a formal sufficiency I had meant that Scripture has an inherent intelligibility that does not derive from some source outside itself. To the contrary, I had stated that a merely material sufficiency would not have an inherent intelligibility, but would rather derive its intelligibility from an outside source. Dr. Liccione specifically quarrels with my reading of Aquinas, and insists to the contrary, that Aquinas affirmed the “material sufficiency” of Scripture

*in the sense explained by WW, in no way affirmed the formal sufficiency of Scripture in the sense explained by WW. That is partly why Aquinas, like Newman and even Vatican II after him, most certainly did see a magisterium as necessary for interpreting Scripture reliably.*

I find this a startling admission, and shows at least that I have not misunderstood the kind of argument being put forward by current disciples of John Henry Newman. Dr. Liccione’s defense for his interpretation of Aquinas is a quotation from S.T. 2.2.5.3:

*Now the formal object of faith is the First Truth, as manifested in Holy Writ and the teaching of the Church, which proceeds from the First Truth. Consequently whoever does not adhere, as to an infallible and Divine rule, to the teaching of the Church, which proceeds from the First Truth manifested*

*in Holy Writ, has not the habit of faith, but holds that which is of faith otherwise than by faith.*

Unfortunately, the passage does not mean what Dr. Liccione claims that it means, as one can discern from its immediate context. Thomas is not concerned here with epistemological questions such as Dr. Liccione's distinction between "opinion" and the infallible teaching of the "magisterium." Indeed, the authority of the magisterium is not the point of discussion at all. Aquinas mentions the "teaching of the Church," but he nowhere mentions the pope, for example. To know what he means we have to know which specific teaching of the Church he is talking about, and why he considers it infallible.

The answer to this question is not difficult to find. Aquinas is asking a very specific question in 2.2. art. 5: "Whether a man who disbelieves one article of faith, can have lifeless faith in the other articles?" Thomas's answer is that "Neither living nor lifeless faith remains in a heretic who disbelieves one article of faith," the reason being that anyone who doubts an article of faith cannot have the virtue of faith. So, the specific question is not about the authority of the magisterium, but about a person who refuses to believe a specific article of faith. The question is not about epistemology, or even the authority of the church, but about the specific content of belief or unbelief. What particular false belief deprives one of the virtue of faith? To answer this we have to know what Thomas means by an "article of faith."

What does Thomas mean by an "article of faith"? The answer can be found in Question 1 of the very same section. Here Thomas identifies the "First Truth"—the "formal object of faith" referred to in q. 5—with Deity itself (art. 1). However, the material things to which faith assents includes not only God, but things related to God, specifically those divine operations that aid the human being on the way to salvation.



Specifically, they are “Things concerning Christ’s human nature, and the sacraments of the Church, or any creatures whatever, come under faith, in so far as by them we are directed to God, and in as much as we assent to them on account of the Divine Truth.”

Aquinas is quite clear what he means by the expression “article of faith.” When using the expression, he is referring quite specifically to the “Rule of Faith” (my expression) summarized in the creeds. He makes this clear in q. 1, art. 8, when objection 5 complains that the “articles of faith” are unsatisfactory because the Eucharist is not mentioned. Aquinas summarizes the articles as follows:

*Now with regard to the majesty of the Godhead, three things are proposed to our belief: first, the unity of the Godhead, to which the first article refers; secondly, the trinity of the Persons, to which three articles refer, corresponding to the three Persons; and thirdly, the works proper to the Godhead, the first of which refers to the order of nature, in relation to which the article about the creation is proposed to us; the second refers to the order of grace, in relation to which all matters concerning the sanctification of man are included in one article; while the third refers to the order of glory, and in relation to this another article is proposed to us concerning the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting. Thus there are seven articles referring to the Godhead.*

*In like manner, with regard to Christ’s human nature, there are seven articles, the first of which refers to Christ’s incarnation or conception; the second, to His virginal birth; the third, to His Passion, death and burial; the fourth, to His descent into hell; the fifth, to His resurrection; the sixth, to His ascension; the seventh, to His coming for the judgment, so that in all there are fourteen articles.”*

The “articles of faith” are simply identified with the subject matter of the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. How do these truths of salvation that are summarized in the Creeds become known? How do the articles of faith become objects of faith? The answer is clear: They are “all things contained in Holy Writ.”  
1.1. rep. obj. 3.

So Thomas states specifically in q. 1. Art 9 why the Church needs a summary formulation of its faith:

*The truth of faith is contained in Holy Writ, diffusely, under various modes of expression, and sometimes obscurely, so that, in order to gather the truth of faith from Holy Writ, one needs long study and practice, which are unattainable by all those who require to know the truth of faith, many of whom have no time for study, being busy with other affairs. And so it was necessary to gather together a clear summary from the sayings of Holy Writ, to be proposed to the belief of all. This indeed was no addition to Holy Writ, but something taken from it.*

Note that Aquinas says (in essence) that the Scripture contains all things “sufficient” for salvation, that the “truth of faith” can be gathered from Scripture, but that one needs study and practice to know this truth. Many do not have this capacity, not because Scripture is not inherently intelligible, but because they do not have the time for study or are too busy. Moreover, the creedal formulations of faith are “no addition to Holy Writ, but something taken from it.”

One could hardly come up with a better way of saying that Scripture is “formally sufficient.” Although not everything in Scripture is clear—it contains some things obscurely—its essential subject matter is evident to those who have the time, study, and practice to read it properly, and its essential content—its intelligible subject matter—can be found in the Creeds, which provide a “clear summary from the sayings

of Holy Writ . . .” not an addition, but “something taken from it.”

Of course, as a Medieval Catholic, Aquinas certainly did believe that the “universal church cannot err”—Vincent of Lerins would agree ; he affirms in the very next article that the pope can draw up a creedal symbol, and he bases his argument for papal authority on a classic Petrine passages (Lk 22:32). But, again, this argument in no way departs from his affirmation of the formal sufficiency of Scripture. Thomas states in 2.10. rep.obj. 1:

*The truth of faith is sufficiently explicit in the teaching of Christ and the apostles. But since, according to 2 Pet. 3:16, some men are so evil-minded as to pervert the apostolic teaching and other doctrines and Scriptures to their own destruction, it was necessary as time went on to express the faith more explicitly against the errors which arose.*

Aquinas does not regard the pope as providing to Scripture an intelligibility it does not already have, or that of bringing out a truth that was not already evident in Scripture. To the contrary, “the truth of faith is *sufficiently explicit* (my emphasis) in the teaching of Christ and the apostles,” that is, Scripture. Rather, papal authority is needed not because Scripture is not clear on the essential matters of salvation, but because “evil-minded” people deliberately “pervert the apostolic teaching,” and so it is necessary to “express the faith more explicitly” against error. No Reformation Christian who would affirm the necessity of confessions, synods, or councils would disagree. Certainly the church needs an authority to correct those who willfully disregard the “truth of faith,” which is “sufficiently explicit” in Scripture.

Moreover, not only does Thomas affirm the inherent intelligibility (and therefore formal sufficiency) of Scripture, he explicitly addresses the question of development

in 1.7, when he asks “Whether the Articles of Faith have increased in course of time.” Thomas responds:

*The articles of faith stand in the same relation to the doctrine of faith, as self-evident principles to a teaching based on natural reason. Among these principles there is a certain order, so that some are contained implicitly in others; thus all principles are reduced, as to their first principle, to this one: “The same thing cannot be affirmed and denied at the same time,” as the Philosopher states (Metaph. iv, text. 9). In like manner all the articles are contained implicitly in certain primary matters of faith, such as God’s existence, and His providence over the salvation of man, according to Heb. 11: “He that cometh to God, must believe that He is, and is a rewarder to them that seek Him.” For the existence of God includes all that we believe to exist in God eternally, and in these our happiness consists; while belief in His providence includes all those things which God dispenses in time, for man’s salvation, and which are the way to that happiness: and in this way, again, some of those articles which follow from these are contained in others: thus faith in the Redemption of mankind includes belief in the Incarnation of Christ, His Passion and so forth.*

Aquinas makes clear then what he means by an “increase” in the articles of faith. The Old Testament prophets had implicit faith in Christ who was to come; the apostles actually knew the “mystery of Christ.” This is hardly a “development” in Newman’s sense.

What finally is the point of Thomas’s statement in 2.2.5.3 quoted by Dr. Liccione? The meaning is clear. A heretic who rejects one of the articles of faith, specifically stated in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, which are “clear summaries” of the “sufficiently explicit” subject matter of revelation found in Scripture (God’s creation and salvation of humanity

in Christ), does not have the faith of the Church, and the Church does not err when it affirms this creedal summary of the teaching about God's salvation of humanity (the "articles of faith") which finds its origin in the clear sufficient explicit teaching of Scripture. Moreover, the magisterial authority of the church has the right and obligation to explicitly endorse and teach clearly this creedal doctrine that summarizes teaching found in Scripture when it is rejected by willful heretics.

This is an understanding that would certainly be affirmed by Anglican theologians in my own tradition like John Jewel or Richard Hooker. In fact, Jewel's "Apology of the Church of England" is a defense of the catholicity of the C of E built around an outline that follows the Creed, which he argues is a summary of the clear teaching of Scripture, and the heart of Catholic faith. Jewel argues further that the authority of the keys means that the Church has the authority to forgive or retain sins based on the promises of Scripture:

*We say also, that the minister doth execute the authority of binding and shutting, as often as he shutteth up the gate of the kingdom of heaven against the unbelieving and stubborn persons, denouncing unto them God's vengeance, and everlasting punishment: or else, when he doth quite shut them out from the bosom of the Church by open excommunication. Out of doubt, what sentence soever the minister of God shall give in this sort, God Himself doth so well allow of it, that whatsoever here in earth by their means is loosed and bound, God Himself will loose and bind, and confirm the same in heaven. And touching the keys, wherewith they may either shut or open the kingdom of heaven, we with Chrysostom say, "They be the knowledge of the Scriptures:" with Tertullian we say, "They be the interpretation of the law:" and with Eusebius, we call them "The Word of God." The Apology of the Church of England*

Jewel's summary of the purpose of the keys is virtually identical to what Aquinas says in *ST* 2.2.5.3. The current controversy that is dividing the Anglican Communion of which I am a member has occurred because leaders of the Church have repudiated not only the plain teaching of Scripture about sexuality, but also the explicit teaching of the creeds concerning the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ for salvation. It is because the teaching office of the Church (as represented by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Anglican Consultative Council) has refused to exercise their responsibilities as holders of the power of the keys that the Communion is in danger of splitting, and that many Anglican Churches in the Global South have broken communion with the Episcopal Church USA, and have instead endorsed the new North American Anglican Province as the faithful, orthodox and catholic representative of Anglicanism in North America.

I conclude then that Dr. Liccione has misinterpreted Aquinas here. His distinction between an interpretation of Scripture that is mere "opinion" rather than the indubitable certainty that comes from the magisterium reflects rather the concern about epistemic certainty that first appears with a vengeance in the post-Reformation Tridentine controversies, and which reappears in the epistemological anxieties that one finds in Newman's critique of "private judgment." But it is not Aquinas.

The key passage for understanding Thomas Aquinas's own views on the role of Scripture is actually found in *ST* 1.1-10, where Thomas discusses *sacra doctrina* in a perichoretic or symbiotic relationship with *sacra scriptura*, as well as his exegetical writings. Thomas's understanding is similar to what Heiko Oberman has called Tradition I, as opposed to the late Medieval understanding of Tradition II which is echoed by Tridentine theologians. Thomas's understanding of Scripture is certainly not the understanding of Tridentine apologists like Bellarmine and (definitely) not that of Newman.

Two of the most helpful recent discussions of Aquinas's understanding of Scripture can be found in:

Thomas Weinandy, Daniel Keating, and John Yocum, eds. *Aquinas on Doctrine: A Critical Introduction* (T & T Clark, 2004).

Thomas Weinandy, Daniel Keating, and John Yocum, eds. *Aquinas on Scripture: An Introduction to his Biblical Commentaries* (T & T Clark, 2005).

I recommend them. Nicholas Healy suggests in the latter volume that Aquinas's understanding of the relation between revelation, Scripture and preaching has affinities to Karl Barth's notion of the threefold Word of God.

Addendum: After posting the above, I decided to add this rather lengthy but telling quote from Nicholas Healy's "Introduction" to the above *Aquinas on Scripture*, pp 18-19.

*[For Thomas,] Sacra doctrina is in some important respects identifiable with Scripture. . . . But sacra doctrina is not normative, or not in anything like the way Scripture is. The teaching of the Creeds is fundamental, not because it is a product of the Church but because the credal statements are drawn from Scripture. The teachings of the Fathers have authority, but only of a probable kind. While Thomas treats the 'holy doctors' with immense respect, he does not hesitate to correct their imperfections, 'loyally explaining' or 'reverently expounding' (exponere reverenter) their remarks so that they better conform to Scripture. He insists that 'faith rests upon the revelation made to the apostles and prophets who wrote the canonical books and not on the revelations (if any such there are) made to other doctors.' Thus Thomas does not anticipate the later Roman Catholic doctrine of two sources of revelation, Scripture and Church tradition. Though he admits an oral apostolic tradition, this has no authority with regard to doctrine, but applies only to specific practices. Scripture alone is the basis of our*

*faith, and of itself it gives us knowledge sufficient for our salvation, to which nothing new can be or need be added (my emphasis).*

*In sum, the exegesis of Scripture can never be dispensed with. We cannot rely upon intermediary work, whether theological systems or conciliar documents or papal teachings. Such intermediaries are vital and constitute the ongoing disputatio that informs the Church's quest for more truthful preaching and witness. But for that quest to be successful, teachers and preachers must return ever anew to Scripture. . . .*

*. . . Thomas engages in conversation with everyone he can possibly think of, irrespective of their methods or even their religious beliefs. A glance at his commentaries will find him referring to Aristotle and other philosophers and their commentators (including mediaeval Muslims), Church doctrines, papal definitions, ancient heresies, the exegesis of the Fathers, and contemporary proposals, together with a cloud of references to other parts of the Bible. All potential sources of truth are brought into the discussion in order that Scripture may be the more deeply probed and understood. Yet none of the non-biblical sources are permitted to govern the interpretation, which lies with the *sensus litteralis vel historicus* alone. Instead, it is they who are brought within Scripture's orbit and made to serve its divine author's communicative intention.*

By the way, I love the above picture of Thomas. Mary (representing the Church) points Thomas to the Father, who hands him the Scriptures. Thomas receives the Scriptures directly from the Father, and looks through them (as it were) to God. Mary (the Church) does not point to herself; neither does she hand Thomas the Scriptures, or interpret them to him. Nor does she stand between Thomas and the Scriptures or between the Scriptures and God. Theologically, this is



correct.

---

## A Little More on the Development of Doctrine

A reader with the *nom de plume* of kepha asks me to respond to a piece by Michael Liccione, which I haven't read yet.

I will look at Prof. Liccione's piece. The two of us have a history together and this sometimes produces more heat than light in our conversations. Perhaps this is because we do indeed have much in common. I think both of us view Thomas Aquinas as our primary mentor. Both of us have a friend in the Pontificator, who helped keep me in Anglicanism back when he was an Episcopalian, and who became Roman Catholic largely through discussions with Michael Liccione and others.

Part of our disagreement has to do with a different understanding of the trajectory of Thomas's theology. Prof. Liccione sees a trajectory from Aquinas through Trent to Newman. I rather see Trent as a rather unfortunate sidetrack in the train of late Medieval Scholasticism, where the kind of Thomism that flourished at that time was a kind of mongrelized version of Suarez or Cajetan, and Newman as rather too much reflecting the epistemological unclarity that followed Descartes. (To put this way too summarily, Newman echoes Descartes when he views the problem of interpreting Scripture as an issue of the certainty of the knower rather than a question of the intelligibility of the extra-mental object. The solution here goes back to both Aquinas and Aristotle, both of whom were realists in insisting on an inherent intelligible correlation between known object, knowing

subject, and language as an “intelligible word,” and the crucial role of the judgment in affirming truth or falsity.)

I think the real issue of disagreement has to do with the question of the inherent intelligibility of Scripture. Followers of Newman often speak of the sufficiency of Scripture in terms of a “material” sufficiency. On the page on my blog titled “Who Are Those Guys?” I speak of how, as I read Aquinas, Arminius and Barth, they do theology as a penetration into the mystery of the inherent intelligibility of revelation as witnessed to in Scripture. I see the same kind of approach in Eastern theologians like Athanasius or Cyril of Alexandria.

Such an understanding of Scripture’s inherent intelligibility presupposes that the sufficiency of Scripture is not material, but formal. The difference here is between a blueprint to make a building, and the bricks of which the building is made. A merely materially sufficient Scripture is like a pile of bricks that can build anything from a cathedral to a tool shed, but the bricks themselves possess no inherent intelligibility (formal sufficiency) in one direction for another. The intelligibility derives from outside the bricks. Conversely, a blueprint is inherently intelligible, and thus has not material but formal sufficiency to create a specific building, whether cathedral or tool shed.

In terms of development, the claim that Scripture is materially sufficient presumes that the intelligibility of revelation derives from elsewhere than Scripture itself. A definitive magisterium (or external tradition) is necessary to decide what to do with the bricks. Without the magisterium it is impossible to know whether the bricks were intended to be a cathedral or a tool shed.

Conversely, if Scripture is formally sufficient, it is comparable to an architect’s blueprint, not a pile of indeterminate bricks. The divine Author of revelation has made himself known, has spoken and acted in such a way that what he

says can be understood, and the inspired apostolic witness to that revelation (Scripture) itself possesses an inherent intelligibility—it is also knowable and understandable. Of course, just as there is an architectural tradition in which blueprints make sense, and in which builders interpret blueprints, so the community of the church is the tradition in which Scripture is properly read. The church's job in this situation is not to act as architect, but to act as contractor—to be faithful in following the architect's plan. On this reading, development adds nothing new to that which is already in the blueprint. Yet without development, the physical building never exists. The architect's plan must be enacted. At the same time, it is always possible to check the building against the original blueprint. It is not the contractor who specifies whether he has been faithful to the original blueprint, but the blueprint (the text) itself. If the contractor includes a bowling alley in the transept of the cathedral, one can always check against the blueprint to see if a bowling alley was part of the original plan. The contractor cannot justify the bowling alley as a legitimate development on the grounds that in architecture, both blueprints (Scripture) and builders (tradition) are equally necessary.

As for Aquinas, we differ on the final trajectory. I don't see the clear trajectory between Aquinas, Trent, and Newman. Rather, I think that Hooker's approach in the *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, or the kind of Thomism I find echoed in Arminius or (more recently) Eric Mascall or Austin Farrer more faithfully reflects Aquinas's own understanding that Scripture is inherently intelligible.

Or, as I say when talking about Barth in my "Who Are Those Guys?" page, the reason why Barth began his *Church Dogmatics* with the doctrine of the Trinity was his realization that God must be in himself who he is in his revelation. In the *ordo cognoscendi* the starting point of a doctrine of the immanent

Trinity (*ordo essendi*) has to be God's revelation as economic Trinity in the history of salvation—a history of which Scripture as God's Word written is the intelligible and formally sufficient witness. Barth's realization was the impetus for the twentieth century revival of Trinitarian theology that has produced tremendous fruit. If God's revelation is to be a true revelation of his character—God is in himself who he is for us—then theology must find its primary task in listening to God's word as echoed in the apostolic witness of Scripture.

Bernard Lonergan and Thomas F. Torrance understand Nicea and Chalcedon in this way. The councils are not a move from one kind of intelligibility to another kind, but a move from one kind of intelligibility to another kind of intelligibility of the same kind. The development that takes place at Nicea and Chalcedon is the move from the "common sense" realism that we find in Scripture—the narrative and symbolic account of God's revelation *propter nos* in the history of revelation—to a critical realism that speaks about God in himself (*in se*) as the necessary implication and presupposition of that revelation. The move from Scripture to Nicea and Chalcedon is a "development," but it is not a development in the sense of adding something new, something that was not in the text all along. Rather, there was an intelligible inevitability to the doctrine of the Trinity. If God is in himself who he has revealed himself to be in the history of his revelation in Israel, in his incarnation in Jesus Christ, in his pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the Church, then God must really be triune *in himself*.

This, I would argue, is very different from the kind of development we see in the rise of the papal office or the later Marian dogmas. That Mary is *theotokos* (the mother of God) follows necessarily from the personal identity of Jesus. If the answer to the question "Who is Jesus?" is "Jesus is God from God, light from light, true God from true God," then his

mother is truly the “bearer of God.” This is primarily not a statement about Mary, but a statement about Jesus. Papal primacy and the assumption and immaculate conception do not follow in this way.

---

## On the Development of Doctrine

On a blog post awhile back entitled “Some Basic Theological Principles (to be discussed later)” I had stated:

*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 scepticism.*

There have been a few inquires about what I meant by the “fundamental choice . . . between Newman’s and Barth’s understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity.” I haven’t answered that question yet. (My life has changed considerably since becoming a theology professor. Ironically, I have less time to do theology blogging.) However, I got an email today from someone (a Roman Catholic) who had read my post on “Why Not Leave?,” and asked me if I had changed my mind. This is my answer, and it relates to the question of development of doctrine:

Dear xxxxxx,

Thanks for writing. I do need to take some time and update my website with contact information.

No, nothing in the last couple of years or so has caused me to change my mind about my commitment to Anglicanism. I have been blessed to be able to fulfill my lifelong dream of teaching in an Anglican seminary for the last year, where I find myself surrounded by wonderful colleagues and students. I just finished teaching a June term course this spring on the *Anglican Way of Theology*, which was a refresher course for me on the Reformed Catholic tradition that I appreciate in Anglicanism.

I love and admire the (Roman) Catholic Church. I did all of my graduate studies in Catholic settings, and I am grateful for the generous scholarship that was provided me at the University of Notre Dame. If I were going to become Catholic, I would have done it during my years studying in Catholic institutions.

It is not my intention to encourage anyone to leave the faith tradition he or she is in. I would especially not encourage someone to leave Rome or Orthodoxy now to become Anglican, given the battle we are in the midst of. At the same time, I am rather encouraged by the events of the last several years. I have been convinced for at least a decade that the Anglican Communion would split over the issue of homosexuality. Whether that would be a split between the whole of the Communion and the handful of Western churches that have embraced the liberal agenda, or whether that would be a split between North and South would depend largely on the direction taken by the Archbishop of Canterbury. This summer the two alternative conferences of GAFCON in Jerusalem, and Lambeth in England, made clear that the future will involve a North/South split. (Whether the Global South technically withdraws from the Communion is a matter of definition, since it is clear that

they now consider Canterbury to be an irrelevance, if not an obstacle to orthodoxy.) The vast majority of the Global South will go with GAFCON and a new orthodox Anglican province will be formed in the US. I have cast my lot with GAFCON and the Global South.

My own reasons for not becoming Roman Catholic have not changed. It was precisely the problem of doctrinal development that I found unsatisfactory. I believe that J. B. Mozley's *The Theory of Development* provides the decisive critique of [John Henry] Newman on development of doctrine. Mozley argues that Newman commits a logical fallacy of ambiguity by not distinguishing between two different kinds of development. Newman is correct that there is genuine development in the early church. For example, Nicea's doctrine of the *homoousios*, or the Trinity as formulated by the Cappadocians, or the Chalcedonian formula of the incarnation as one person and two natures is not found explicitly in the New Testament. At the same time, however, what is in the New Testament is all the data that make the *homoousios*, the Trinitarian formula of three persons and one substance, and the Chalcedonian formula necessary conclusions. So, for example, the New Testament is clear that Jesus Christ is not only human, but fully divine. He is the Word who was "with God" and "was God" and was "made flesh" (John 1:1,14). Passages that apply to YHWH in the Old Testament are quoted as referring to Jesus in the New Testament (Phil. 2:10-11; Heb. 1:8). Jesus is the One through whom the Father created the world (Col. 1:16). He is God's wisdom (Col. 2:3), and the "fullness of deity dwells bodily" in him (Col. 2:9).

To the question whether the New Testament teaches that Jesus is fully God, the answer must be "yes."

Similarly, to the question whether there is one God, and yet three who are identified as God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the answer is also "yes."

So the “development” of incarnational and Trinitarian doctrine that takes place at Nicea, Chalcedon, etc., is really simply the necessary logical unfolding of what is already clearly present in the New Testament. If Jesus is fully God, then he must “of the same substance” as God. If the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are equally God, and yet there is only one God, then God must be three persons in one nature.

Karl Barth began the contemporary revival of Trinitarian theology in his *Church Dogmatics* 1/1 by articulating the principle that God must be in himself who he is in his revelation. If God has revealed himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the history of revelation, then God must be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in himself. The economic Trinity necessarily implies the immanent Trinity.

In Bernard Lonergan’s *The Way to Nicea*, he makes a similar point by distinguishing between common sense realism and critical realism. The genre of the New Testament writings is that of common sense realism. The New Testament uses the language of symbol and narrative to tell of how God relates to us in Jesus. The language of Nicea is the language of critical realism. Nicea speaks of who the Son of God must be in himself if he is going to be God for us.

Mozley speaks of this kind of development in terms of what I will call “Development 1.” Development 1 adds nothing to the original content of faith, but rather brings out its necessary implications. Mozley says that Aquinas is doing precisely this kind of development in his discussion of the incarnation in the *Summa Theologiae*.

There is another kind of development, however, which I will call “Development 2.” Development 2 is genuinely new development that is not simply the necessary articulation of what is said explicitly in the Scriptures.

Classic examples of Development 2 would include the



differences between the doctrine of the *theotokos* and the dogmas of the immaculate conception or the assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In the former, Marian dogma is not actually saying something about Mary, but rather something about Christ. If Jesus Christ is truly God, and Mary is his mother, then Mary is truly the Mother of God (*theotokos*). She gives birth, however, to Jesus' humanity, not his eternal person, which has always existed and is generated eternally by the Father. The doctrine of the *theotokos* is a necessary implication of the incarnation of God in Christ, which is clearly taught in the New Testament. However, the dogmas of the immaculate conception and the assumption are not taught in Scripture, either implicitly or explicitly. They are entirely new developments.

The same would be true, of course, for the doctrine of the papacy. The New Testament says much about the role of Simon Peter as a leader of the apostles. It does not say anything explicit, however, about the bishop of Rome being the successor to Peter. The Eastern fathers, e.g., Cyprian, interpret the Petrine passages that Rome has applied to the papacy as applying to all bishops.

Other examples of Development 2 would include purgatory and indulgences.

Newman presents his argument for development as a dilemma. Anglicans (and Protestants in general) accept the dogmas of Nicea, of the Trinity, of Chalcedon, etc., but these are not taught explicitly in Scripture. They are developments. But Anglicans do not accept the doctrines of the papacy, the Marian dogmas, etc., which are also developments. Anglicans are accordingly inconsistent. To accept one development is logically to accept the others as well.

Mozley's response is that Newman conflates two quite distinct kinds of development. Development 1 adds nothing new to the content of faith. Development 2 does. Accepting Development 1

is a necessary consequence of taking seriously what the New Testament actually says. Development 2, however, adds something genuinely new to the content of faith. Nicea is an example of Development 1, not Development 2. The infallibility of the papacy is an example of Development 2, not Development 1. Accepting Development 1 does not logically entail accepting Development 2. By not distinguishing between the two kinds of development, Newman commits a logical fallacy, and his argument collapses.

I do think Mozley's critique of Newman is correct.

I hope that helps. Again, I wish you the best in your current situation. It is not at all my intention to convince Roman Catholics to leave their church or become Anglicans. I've just told something of why I cannot become a Catholic myself.

Grace and Peace,

William Witt