

NOTES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOCTRINE

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THIS BRIEF COLLECTION of notes gathers a number of observations from Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox perspectives, by engaging portions of three works: Kevin Vanhoozer’s *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, John Henry Cardinal Newman’s *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, and Peter Bouteneff’s *Sweeter than Honey: Orthodox Thinking on Dogma and Truth*.

K. Vanhoozer: The Drama of Doctrine

I begin with a number of Vanhoozer’s statements:¹

- “Doctrine is a vital ingredient in the well-being of the church, a vital aid to its public witness.” (xii)
- “Christian doctrine directs us in the way of truth and life...” (xii)
- “Christian doctrine is necessary for human flourishing: only doctrine shows us who we are, why we are here, and what we are to do.” (xiii)
- “Christian doctrine [is] the considered result of faith’s search for biblical understanding...” (2)
- “Employing the gospel as its primary ... resource for dealing with life’s most persistent questions, Christian doctrine teaches us how to cope with various real life crises.” (2)
- The purpose of doctrine is to “lead us” in the “way of Jesus Christ.” (2)
- Doctrine is “derived from Scripture” and “developed in the believing community.” (2)
- “Doctrine helps the church understand where it has been ‘thrown’ and what role it is to play there.” (2)
- “Sound doctrine – authoritative teaching – is vital for the life of the church, and hence for the life of the world.” (3)
- “Christian doctrine ... should serve the purpose of fostering truthful ways of living.” (14)
- “Doctrine seeks not simply to state theoretical truths but to embody truth in ways of living.” (15)
- “*The proper end of the drama of doctrine is wisdom: lived knowledge, and a performance of the truth.*” (21, author’s italics)

For Vanhoozer, doctrine is distinct from Scripture, but ordered towards the application of Scripture to our lives. Doctrine is what happens when we faithfully try to make sense of the Bible. Vanhoozer uses the metaphor of “drama” to describe what doctrine is and how it works: the Bible is the “script” and doctrine is our effort to read that script and “perform” it (i.e. live on the basis of it). The end of doctrine, the goal towards which it is ordered, is simply the Christian life – the living of the gospel.

1. All from Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), pages as cited.

It appears that Vanhoozer, in affirming the principle of *sola Scriptura*, would not regard the Church's doctrine as "the deposit of faith," or as Apostolic in that sense. This means that doctrine is not a form of revelation, not inspired, and therefore not primary. What, then, makes doctrine "authoritative"? Vanhoozer affirms that doctrine is both "necessary" and "vital" — that "only doctrine show us who we are, why we are here, and what we are to do." But how can doctrine be said to be "necessary" when a principle of *sola Scriptura* is affirmed? Vanhoozer seems to suggest that while God's revelation is made to us "only" in Scripture, it is nevertheless impossible to *understand* Scripture without doctrine — not because doctrine is a necessary hermeneutic for reading Scripture, but that, quite simply, it *is* reading Scripture.

Thus, Vanhoozer seems to suggest that doctrine is always being developed, because we are always reading Scripture. He seeks a corrective to the kind of "cultural-linguistic" understanding of Biblical meaning and authority — which he claims underlies much postliberal theology — by affirming instead a "canonical-linguistic" approach that reclaims the Bible itself as the norm by which doctrine is known to be "sound" and therefore "authoritative."²

J. H. Newman: The Development of Doctrine

The main weakness in Vanhoozer's approach is that it fails to give a sufficient explanation for how doctrines are and remain authoritative. However, Newman's *Essay* gets to the heart of this theological dilemma. Newman of course accepts an understanding of doctrine as the Apostolic "deposit of faith," handed down through the centuries, authoritative because it is inspired — revealed to the Apostles by Christ himself. As such, it is in some sense inherent within Scripture, the written expression of the Apostolic witness. Yet while the Church teaches that God's revelation has been completed in Christ, at the same time it has continued through the centuries to proclaim certain doctrines which were never discussed explicitly in the Bible, and even to identify them as articles of faith — the hypostases of the Trinity, the being of the Godhead, the natures of Christ, the hypostatic union. If these "new" doctrines are binding, then are they not effectively new *revelation*? If they are *not* new revelation, aren't they then "secondary," and therefore not binding? How can doctrines that were never discussed by the Apostles be said to be part of their enduring, authoritative witness?³

Newman's epistemology of "implicit" and "explicit" knowledge offers an explanation. He observed that the human mind can "know" something without having to have a conscious thought about it. He calls this "implicit" or "unconscious" knowing. (For example, we "know" far more than we can ever actually "think about" at any given moment.) So, while the Apostles were not consciously aware of the Church's subsequent dogmas and theological vocabulary, this doesn't mean that they had no knowledge of what was later articulated as doctrine. Rather, "the Apostles had the *fullness* of revealed knowledge, a fullness which they could as little realize to themselves, as the human mind, as such, can have all its thoughts present before it at once."⁴ That is, they implicitly believed what the Church later explicitly professed.

2. The difficulty here is that, if doctrine *is* our reading of Scripture, it is impossible to appeal to the Bible as the norm which verifies doctrine without engaging in *another* act of reading the Bible. We are then effectively verifying doctrine with doctrine. This is not necessarily a problem but it should be unacceptable to Vanhoozer.

3. The Scholastics and subsequent theologians argued that later developments were not "new" because either they were the logical conclusion of the original or earlier doctrines, or were "clarifications" of the same; yet such a logical relationship is not always in evidence.

4. John Henry Cardinal Newman, unpublished paper on the development of doctrine, 1868, cited in J. Derek Holmes, ed., *The Theological Papers of John Henry Newman on Biblical Inspiration and on Infallibility* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 156.

So in Newman's view, if we were to propose to the Apostles the three hypostases in one substance, the two natures in one person, but without the formulas, without the vocabulary, they would be able to say that this doctrine is indeed what they affirmed to be true, without the formulas, without the vocabulary. "Thus the holy Apostles would without words know all the truths concerning the high doctrines of theology, which controversialists after them have piously and charitably reduced to formulae, and developed through argument."⁵ This means that the doctrines which have developed throughout the centuries, and which the Church has affirmed to be genuine, are and remain authoritative, precisely because they *are* the authentic Apostolic witness to the one divine revelation completed in Christ. This is a bold claim indeed, yet it makes sense of the reality of what we profess.⁶ For Newman, doctrine — the "deposit of faith" — is not a series of propositions, "not a number of formulas"⁷ that the Apostles had all worked out, but a *way of thinking* with the mind of Christ — a kind of "living idea" in God's own Heart.

P. Bouteneff: Dogma and Truth

Unlike Vanhoozer and Newman, Bouteneff does not offer a systematic theology of doctrine but presents a sketch of the various features of Orthodox understandings of doctrine and its authority, sources, and development. For Bouteneff doctrine is the teaching of the Church and the means by which the Holy Spirit teaches and "guides us into all truth."⁸ This activity of the Spirit within the Church begins with the event of Pentecost and the Apostolic witness to Christ that it empowered. It continues with the teachings of the Fathers and the councils, up to the present day. Though it sounds as if Bouteneff is describing an ongoing process of pneumatic activity, and therefore of revelation, he insists that "since God's final revelation in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ ... there are effectively no new teachings. There are, rather, new formulations, new expressions, and new implications..." (135).⁹

Bouteneff draws a distinction between doctrine and dogma — that is, between the teachings of the Church, and the teachings of the Church *that are binding*. Doctrines become dogma when they have been "clearly defined" by ecumenical councils and "universally accepted" by the Orthodox churches (198). They define what make us Christian. To oppose them is to place oneself "outside the communion of faith that is the Church" (197).

5. John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 6th ed., repr. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 191-192.

6. In addition, Newman offers a number of "notes" or characteristics of "genuine" doctrinal developments: preservation of type (the development remains essentially the same kind of thing as the original); continuity of principles (the principles that underlie the development remain the same); power of assimilation (the development has absorbed or overshadowed other developments); logical sequence (the theological and intellectual fruits of the development are logically coherent); anticipation of its future (the development was clearly anticipated in the earliest stages of the original doctrine); conservative action upon its past (the development tends to preserve the original doctrine and build on it, not contradict or eliminate it); chronic vigour (the development has a lasting rather than a transitory character).

7. Holmes, ed., 157.

8. Peter Bouteneff, *Sweeter than Honey: Orthodox Thinking on Dogma and Truth* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006), 118. Subsequent page references given parenthetically.

9. As an example of this, Bouteneff cites St Gregory of Nazianzus on the humanity of Christ's body and soul: "this was not a new teaching but the formulation of a truth already revealed in the Scriptures... Although Gregory did seem to say something new, he was only giving expression to something that had been believed everywhere, always, and by all who were of the Church" (135).

Bouteneff also identifies a second distinction between “source” dogmas and “consequent” dogmas, that is, dogmas directly about Christ and the Trinity, and dogmas that “follow inexorably from the christological and trinitarian dogmas” (201). An example of a consequent dogma is Mary’s virginal conception of Christ, which is inexorably contingent upon the dogma of Christ’s divinity (202). An example of a doctrine which is *not* consequent dogma would be the sinlessness of the Virgin Mary which, though proclaimed by the Church’s liturgy, is *not* inexorably contingent upon its Christology. Bouteneff claims that such non-dogmatic doctrines do not deal with matters of salvific consequence: “in discerning dogmas, the Church asks whether our salvation is truly at stake in the matter. Is it a matter of our spiritual life and death? If not, we do not dogmatize” (206).¹⁰

Like Vanhoozer, Bouteneff insists that Scripture remains the norm for all doctrine: “To discern whether a teaching is of the Church, our primary criterion is Scripture” (133). He also, like Vanhoozer, recognizes that “Scripture is not self-interpreting” (149): “we read Scripture ‘in the Church’ ... in the light of the Church’s tradition” (133) — “through the patristic legacy, the Church’s liturgical life, the ecumenical councils, the saints, and even the Church’s iconography and architecture” (142). Bouteneff’s view of Tradition seems to mirror Vanhoozer’s view of doctrine: “Tradition represents the right reading of Scripture” (146). It is “a way of reading Scripture,” an “activity” (144), “the unique *mode of receiving the truth* that is found in Scripture” (145). Unlike Vanhoozer, however, Bouteneff recognizes up front that “the relationship between Scripture and Tradition is circular” (146) and “there is no escape from the circularity” (192): “Tradition represents the right reading of Scripture. But how do we identify what is of Tradition? By referring to Scripture” (146).

Bouteneff also admits that the process of determining whether or not a doctrine is genuine, and further, whether or not it is dogma, “requires time, and often a good deal of it” (138). In fact, “strictly speaking, we can’t know, here and now” (132). For example, in the case of the Nicene Creed, it was neither the council itself, nor the bishops, but the *reception of their teaching*, which took decades, that finally “answered” the question of whether it was a genuine development of doctrine.

10. This distinction between doctrines related or unrelated to our salvation is problematic because acceptance of dogma entails a *way of life*, which in turn entails acceptance of a whole series of doctrines that may or may not be dogma, but that define *what it means to accept the dogma*. In this sense, there is no such thing as a doctrine which is not a matter of our salvation. Bouteneff himself admits that faith “is never just a matter of subscribing ... it is a vital conformity to Christ as he is revealed to us” (209-10).

To summarize:

	Protestant / Reformed Vanhoozer	Roman Catholic Newman	Orthodox Bouteneff
View of Doctrine	“Low” doctrine is distinct from and contingent upon Biblical revelation; it is our act of reading the Bible	“High” doctrine is conterminous with Biblical revelation; it inheres with the Apostolic witness	“Broad” doctrine is not the content of revelation but is the means of our receiving it
Doctrine is authoritative because	the Bible is	being conterminous with the Apostolic witness of Scripture, it is divinely inspired	the Church’s lasting integration of them into her life and worship (Tradition) validates them as genuine
Doctrinal development is a function of	the ongoing interpretation of Scripture necessary for living the gospel	the Church’s ongoing reflection on the Apostolic witness	the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit, at work in and through us

In markedly different ways, all three perspectives agree that doctrine is and must be Scriptural. They would all affirm, as Bouteneff says, that “there is no truth in the Church that is not Scriptural truth: nothing that isn’t based on what is given to us in the Bible” (143). Vanhoozer’s post-postliberal approach wants to re-locate the authority of doctrine in Scripture itself (rather than in the believing community’s reading of Scripture), yet is caught in the hermeneutical circle to which his *sola Scriptura* principle binds him: how can the Bible be the ultimate norm for doctrine when it cannot be read *apart* from doctrine? Newman doesn’t encounter this problem because for him doctrine is conterminous with or inherent in Scripture, and therefore shares in its divine authority and inspiration. Bouteneff doesn’t go so far, but while asserting the primacy of Scripture, takes the path to which Vanhoozer objects, namely, that of grounding the authority of doctrine in its reception by the Church. This is inevitable if doctrine is understood to be distinct from and secondary to Scripture: it must then turn to Scripture as its norm, requiring a further act of interpretation, thus falling into the hermeneutical circle. This trap is only avoided when doctrine is understood to be essentially *the same thing* as Scripture — the Apostolic witness to the revelation of Christ — and therefore authoritative.

What would a faithful development of the doctrine of marriage look like?

According to Vanhoozer, it would have to:

- be derived from Scripture and developed in the believing community
- contribute to the well-being of the Church and its understanding of its role and witness
- show us who we are, why we are here, and what we are to do
- help us to be people who truly live the gospel of Christ

According to Newman, it would have to:

- be present either explicitly or implicitly in the original Apostolic witness
- be something that the Apostles themselves would have affirmed

and it ought to:

- be essentially the same kind of teaching as the original doctrine of marriage
- be founded on the same principles
- have absorbed or assimilated other developments of the doctrine of marriage
- contribute to the formation of a logically coherent theology of marriage
- have been clearly anticipated in the earliest stages of the doctrine of marriage
- preserve and build on, not contradict or nullify, the original doctrine of marriage
- not fade away with time

According to Bouteneff, it would have to:

- be founded on the Church's reading of Scripture
- "derive its trustworthiness from the tradition of the Fathers" (170) and the councils
- resonate with the liturgy, hymnody, and iconography of the Church
- be fully received by the faithful of the Orthodox churches

All of these sound like excellent criteria and are valuable guidelines for the consideration of the development of doctrine. Though as Anglicans we may feel no small affinity for the Orthodox tradition of reserve in the definition of dogma and the systematization of belief, as Western Christians we have been shaped by centuries of cultural and philosophical influences that have had no place in the Orthodox tradition. It is not possible for us as a church to restore a "lost innocence" by jumping into epistemological waters that we don't know how to navigate. Rather, while we may be daunted by the way Newman obviously sets the bar of his criteria at its highest, the insight he gives us into the limits of Anglicanism are invaluable and, I would venture to say, has the most at this juncture to offer us. For better or worse, we are children of the Reformation, and of the Enlightenment, and must address the difficulties this heritage has left us, neither turning a blind eye to them nor seeking simply to escape them.

When we know that doctrine matters because the truth matters, and that God's making Himself known to us in that truth is a gift of His love, then we may at last allow doctrine to do what it was made to do — teach us.