

How Doctrine Develops Without Changing the Faith

Development, Corruption, and the Test the Objector Already Trusts

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I. The Objection Underneath the Others

One objection runs underneath a dozen others. Whenever the Catholic Church is shown teaching what the New Testament does not state in so many words—the Trinity in those terms, the canon of Scripture, the Marian dogmas, papal infallibility—the charge is the same: *this was added later, therefore it is not apostolic*. The Protestant presses it against Rome; the Orthodox press it against the second millennium's definitions; the Watchtower presses a crude version against all historic Christianity. If the objection holds, a great many pages fall together. So it is worth stating the method that answers all of them: how to tell a genuine development of the apostolic faith from a corruption of it. The deposit of faith is closed—nothing is added to what the apostles handed on, and the Church has no power to reveal a new truth. What she can do, and always has done, is understand the one deposit more deeply over time, the way a person understands a lifelong friend better without acquiring a different friend.¹

II. The Word Test Fails on the Objector's Own Bible

Start where the crude form of the objection breaks. If a doctrine is false because its *word* does not appear in Scripture, then "Trinity," "Incarnation," and "sola scriptura" all fall together—and so, fatally for the objector, does the sixty-six-book canon, for no inspired text lists the books of the Bible. The table of contents in the Protestant's own hands was not dictated by an apostle; it was discerned by the Church across the fourth century, ratified at Rome and at the councils of Hippo and Carthage in the 390s. The *reality* of the Trinity is everywhere in the New Testament; the *word* was defined at Nicaea in 325 to exclude those who denied the reality. The canon is apostolic in substance; its *list* is a fourth-century development. Anyone who accepts the canon has therefore already accepted development—he simply has not noticed that he did. The only question left is not *whether* doctrine develops but *which* developments are sound.²

III. Development Is Promised, Not Improvised

Christ did not hand the apostles a finished manual of systematic theology. He gave them himself, and a promise: "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:12–13). Guidance *into* the truth already given, unfolding over time under the Spirit—that is development, promised by the Lord himself. And the apostles practiced it within their own lifetimes. They created an office that had not existed, the diaconate, to meet a new need (Acts 6:1–6). They settled the greatest doctrinal crisis of the first generation—whether Gentiles must be circumcised—not by quoting a text but by convening a council whose decree binds with the authority of "the Holy Spirit and us" (Acts 15:28). A Church forbidden to develop would be a Church the Spirit had stopped guiding on the day the last apostle died—and that is a proposition no Christian body actually holds, since each has its canon and its creed, both of them post-apostolic developments.³

IV. Vincent, Read to the End of His Sentence

The critic's favorite witness is Vincent of Lérins, who in 434 gave the rule of "what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all." The rule is quoted against development and the sentence is stopped halfway. But Vincent, in the very same *Commonitory*, asks the question directly: "But shall there be no progress of religion in the Church of Christ?" and answers, "Let there be, by all means, and the greatest progress." He then draws precisely the distinction the objection collapses. "Progress" (*profectus*) means that a thing "is enlarged in itself," while "alteration" (*permutatio*) means that it "is transformed into something else." The faith is to advance and grow with the years—but "in the same doctrine, in the same sense, and in the same meaning," as a child's body grows into a man's while remaining the same body with the same members. Vincent is not

development's enemy; he is its first great theorist, and his canon is a test *for* sound development, not a bar against it.⁴

V. Newman's Seven Notes

The sharpest form of the objection is that development "proves too much"—that if any later teaching can be called the unfolding of an earlier one, the principle would justify any addition whatever, and a rule that forbids nothing is no rule. This would land if development had no criteria. It has. John Henry Newman—a Protestant when he began the study, a Catholic by the time he finished it, in part because of what the study showed him—set out seven notes by which a true development is distinguished from a corruption. A genuine development preserves the same *type* or idea; it continues the same *principles*; it has the power to *assimilate* new facts without being overturned by them; it follows by *logical sequence* from what came before; it is *anticipated* by earlier hints and tendencies; it *conserves* the past rather than reversing it; and it shows *chronic vigor*—it lasts and bears fruit, unlike a corruption, which flares and decays like a fever.⁵

These notes forbid a great deal. By them, the growth of Nicene doctrine out of the New Testament passes—it preserves the type of the worshiped Christ, continues the principles of monotheism and the Son's divinity, is anticipated in John and Paul, and has lasted seventeen centuries—while the Arian innovation fails, reversing the worship the Church had always offered. The Marian dogmas grow organically from the "new Eve" of Justin and Irenaeus in the second century; the prosperity gospel, by contrast, reverses the very cross it claims to preach, and fails the test of conserving the past. A rule that passes Nicaea and fails Arius, that passes the Immaculate Conception and fails the prosperity gospel, is doing exactly what a rule must do: forbidding things. The charge that development "proves too much" mistakes a criterion for a blank check.

VI. Development, "New Light," and Restoration

Two counterfeits of development throw the genuine article into relief. The Watchtower's "new light" (Prov. 4:18, pressed into service) is offered as progressive revelation—but measured by Newman's notes it is not development but reversal: the generation of 1914 redefined, the presence moved from 1874 to 1914, the faithful slave reassigned, teachings not enlarged but contradicted. Development preserves the type; "new light" abolishes yesterday's type and prints a new one. The Protestant restorationist makes the opposite error: convinced that all development is corruption, he tries to leap back over two thousand years to a "New Testament church" reconstructed from the book alone—and produces, inevitably, a nineteenth- or twentieth-century body no earlier Christian would recognize, because a tradition pruned of all growth is not the acorn restored but a cutting with no roots.

"It appears later, therefore it is not apostolic" is thus a test that no historic Christian body can survive, the objector's own canon and creed included. The right question is never whether a formulation is late but whether it unfolds the apostolic reality or contradicts it—and there are tests, Vincent's and Newman's, that reliably tell the acorn's oak from a different tree. This is the method every page of this site relies on when it shows a doctrine present in seed before it was defined in words: the Trinity, the papacy, the Immaculate Conception, the canon itself. Development is not Rome's escape hatch. It is how the Spirit keeps the promise Christ made in the upper room.⁶

Endnotes

1. Jude 3 (RSV). Scripture quotations, unless noted, are from the Revised Standard Version.
2. On the fourth-century canon, the councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397, 419); see this site's deuterocanon and sola scriptura pages.
3. John 16:12–13; Acts 6:1–6; 15:28 (RSV).
4. Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitory* 23.
5. John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845), ch. 5, the seven notes; on Mary as the new Eve, Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 100, and Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.22.
6. On the Watchtower's "new light" as reversal rather than development, see this site's authority, this-generation, and parousia pages.

For Further Reading

An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine, by St. John Henry Newman—the seven notes. Free online at <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/development/>.

The Commonitory, by St. Vincent of Lérins, A.D. 434—antiquity, consent, and true progress. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3506.htm>.

Early Christian Doctrines, by J. N. D. Kelly—how the doctrines actually developed.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§66–67, 94 on the growth of the Church's understanding of the deposit.

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"When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth."

—John 16:13

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the Catholic understanding of the development of doctrine*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.