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## Aspects of Change in the Postapostolic Church

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# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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**Aspects of Change in the Postapostolic Church**  
**CARL VOLZ**

**Tertullian and the Early Christian View  
of Tradition**  
**ROBERT L. WILKEN**

**The Canonist "Panormitanus" and the Problem  
of Scriptural Authority**  
**HERMANN SCHUESSLER**

**Luther's Exegetical Principle of the Analogy  
of Faith**  
**OTTO HOF**

**The Dead Sea Scrolls**  
**ALFRED VON ROHR SAUER**

**Homiletics**

**Book Review**

**Vol. XXXVIII**

**April 1967**

**No. 4**

# WHY WILL TEEN YOUTH LEAVE YOUR CHURCH



The church to teen-agers resembles nothing so much as a maze of transparent walls. The walls are the thick glass of adult concepts and adult frozenness, and the maze of them is endless. It is possible to wonder for years without finding that one single point of communication that suddenly brings "church" to life in the adolescent consciousness.

We might do well to face the maze that cuts us off from mutual witness with our teen-agers. Doctrinal constructs are foreign to the experience of being a teen-ager. To a teen-ager such systems come to violate that sense of inner flow and movement which accompany an intense experience of growing and discovering—instead of encouraging the radical and God-given search for new and visionary forms of living, creating, expressing.

As we live on in the church, there is no tendency quite so powerful as to concretize our wisdom and experience in our speech and worship. Our liturgies and communications, our friendships and attitudes take on a consistency appealing to other adults but not to teen-agers caught up in the undeniable currents of their own yearnings to experience. The teen-ager may do us the favor of calling us "square." Or he may just turn off the sound of our voice. And he may quietly wrap up his tent and steal away, while we wonder where the little Arabs of the church have gone, and why, and what we can do to bring them back.

The Gospel itself can seem to be a power hostile to the teen-ager, who wants to go out and adventure—particularly if this Gospel stays in such a static form in the local pulpit, without any further challenge to new ministry and new forms of exploring the life of adventure and service. So often the Christ who died once for all has been given to appear as the Grand Finish to all human effort for any of the underdogs.

This is why some churches can still ignore the classes that seem to be composed of "undesirable people." And yet the teen-agers—perhaps out of an innate sympathy and understanding of what it means to be so treated—want to and would take an amazing role in the church as it still "saves" in the power of the Creator Spirit the beaten ones who call for help.

Excerpts from *Before They Start to Leave*, a new paperback for parents of teen-agers and youth leaders by WALTER RIESS, editor of *Spirit* magazine. 18 chapters, 5×7½, \$1.50(†). Use the enclosed order card.

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# Aspects of Change in the Postapostolic Church

CARL VOLZ

A question sometimes posed by critics of dogmatic development within the church is this, "Would St. Peter have understood the technical Christological terms employed by the Nicene Creed or the Chalcedonian Formula?" Assuming that the answer is no, the questioner proceeds to insist that the development of dogma therefore represents a change, if not a deterioration of the pristine Gospel. Adolph von Harnack's well-known "fall of the church" theory is based on the assumption of a radical discontinuity between the *kerygma* of the Beatitudes and the *dogma* of later centuries. Somewhere and somehow, to use Chesterton's phrase, "the puppy became a cat instead of becoming more doggy." The relevance of the question is seen in light of contemporary efforts at renewal of the church. If Christianity was Hellenized during later centuries, it is clear what course we should follow. We should emancipate ourselves from the shackles that bind the Biblical faith, break free of the tyranny of Greek philosophy, Aristotelian metaphysics, of bishops and dogmas, and return to the beginnings. What is earlier is always better, and what is earliest is best of all. This basically Harnackean view

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seems implicit in Harvey Cox' distrust of "archaic" dogmatic formulations that have produced an endless succession of insoluble conundrums and have seriously adulterated the Biblical view to the point where it is incompatible with our own experience.<sup>1</sup> It is in the light of such assertions that this study seeks to return to the fathers to determine their own understanding of change as it relates to dogma.

## THE MEANING OF CHANGE

There are at least three possible interpretations of the word "change" with respect to this inquiry. We can maintain that there was actual alteration (the chair turned into a statue), or that there was change by growth (the infant grew to manhood). A third possible option is to see retrogression from the greater to the lesser (the man became a child). It is the contention of this writer that the second interpretation best fits the facts of the case. The fathers understood change in the sense of growth, progress, or development, without in any way altering the content of the faith as delivered by the prophets and apostles. From the voluminous patristic material available on the subject, two developments have here been singled out for attention: first, the Rules of Faith of Tertullian and Irenaeus, the two most significant Christian theologians at the turn of

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<sup>1</sup> Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1965), p. 220 and *passim*.

the second century; and second, the conciliar decisions of the first four ecumenical councils.

#### FINDING THE ABSOLUTE

Laying aside for the moment the question of change, a prior concern is isolating that which allegedly changes or does not change. What was the nature of the chair or infant? In the understanding of the early fathers, it was simply *God's revelation to man through the person, words, and work of Jesus, as foretold by the prophets and handed down by apostolic testimony*. Most Biblical scholars today accept as true that the apostolic testimony itself represented various interpretations of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and as such the Gospels themselves are a change from the pristine Christ-event. But the fathers of the second century appear not to have been conscious of a development between the years 40 and 100. If they were, they accepted such development as of equal authority with the Christ-event itself (that is, the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and session of Jesus). Beside the apostolic testimony they ranged the prophets as possessing equal authority. Polycarp asked the Philippians to serve Christ, "as He Himself has commanded, and also the apostles who preached the Gospel to us, and the prophets who foretold the coming of the Lord."<sup>2</sup> The absolute from which further dogma was developed seems to have been more than the Christ-event, inasmuch as the fathers also accepted apostolic testimony as absolute. The pages of these writers are filled with references to the absolute au-

thority of apostolic testimony. "The apostles received the Gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ. Armed therefore with their charge, and having been fully assured through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and confirmed in the Word of God with full conviction of the Holy Spirit, they went forth with the glad tidings," wrote Clement of Rome.<sup>3</sup> Hermas states that it is the apostolic message that must be preached throughout the world.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Justin clearly placed the apostolic testimony on a par with the Christ-event as authoritative when he wrote, "In our time Jesus Christ, who was crucified, died, rose again, and, ascending into heaven, began to reign; on account of what was proclaimed by the apostles in all nations as coming from Him, there is joy for those who look forward to the incorruption which He has promised."<sup>5</sup> Irenaeus believed that heretics must be convicted from "the words of the Lord and the apostles."<sup>6</sup> Polycarp regarded St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians as "the foundation-stone of your faith,"<sup>7</sup> and Justin considered the Gospels as authoritative because they were the "memoirs" of the apostles.<sup>8</sup> Athanasius, writing somewhat later than the apostolic fathers (c. 350) summarized the absolute when he referred to "the actual original tradition, teaching and faith of the Catholic Church, which the Lord be-

<sup>3</sup> Clement of Rome, *Corinthians* 42, PG 1, 291.

<sup>4</sup> Hermas, *Shepherd*, Sim. 9:17:1, PG 2, 998.

<sup>5</sup> Justin Martyr, *I Apology* 42, PG 6, 392.

<sup>6</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1:27:3, PG 7, 689.

<sup>7</sup> Polycarp, *Philippians* 3:2, PG 5, 1008.

<sup>8</sup> Justin Martyr, *I Apology* 66, PG 6, 429.

<sup>2</sup> Polycarp, *Philippians* 6:3. In *Patrologiae cursus completus*, ed. by J. P. Migne, *Series Graeca*, Paris 1857-66, Vol. 5, col. 1011. Hereafter Migne will be referred to as PG (*Series Graeca*) or PL (*Series Latina*).

stowed, the apostles proclaimed, and the fathers safeguarded."<sup>9</sup>

Just as the earlier fathers believed that the Old Testament coupled with apostolic witness to Christ was the constant from which all teaching must be derived, so also the later fathers reflect the same attitude toward Scripture as primary authority. Clement of Alexandria insisted throughout the seventh chapter of the *Stromata* that Scripture is the criterion by which truth or heresy are to be distinguished. To cite but one of numerous possible references, "[The Christian] must grow old in the Scriptures, maintaining apostolic and ecclesiastical authority in doctrine, live most correctly in accordance with the Gospel, and discover proofs from the Law and the Prophets. Following Scripture, let us establish what we have said."<sup>10</sup> Origen repeatedly refers to Scripture as the criterion of truth. "Truths are either discovered in Holy Scripture or deduced from it by following the correct method."<sup>11</sup> Athanasius insisted that "the holy and inspired Scriptures are fully sufficient for the proclamation of the truth,"<sup>12</sup> and Cyril of Jerusalem held that "our saving faith derives its force not from capricious reasonings but from what may be proved out of Scripture."<sup>13</sup> Augustine believed that "in the plain teaching of Scripture we find all that concerns our belief and moral conduct."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Athanasius, *Epistolae ad Serapionem*, PG 26, 593.

<sup>10</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7:16, PG 9, 544—545.

<sup>11</sup> Origen, *De principiis*, Praef. 10, PG 11, 121.

<sup>12</sup> Athanasius, *Contra gentes* 1, PG 25, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Orations* 4:17, PG 33, 477.

<sup>14</sup> Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana* 2:14, PL 34, 42.

#### RULES OF FAITH

Acknowledging the Old Testament together with the apostolic witness (both oral and written) as the irreducible absolute did not guarantee unanimity of interpretation. In fact, the very nature of Scripture served rather to fragment the church. Tertullian saw this clearly when he warned that "without Scripture there can be no heresy."<sup>15</sup> A student of the early church soon recognizes that the most varied and sometimes bizarre interpretations existed alongside each other. The meaning of the fall, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and coming judgment found almost as many interpretations as there were interpreters, leading the historian to acknowledge the impossibility of constructing a single or uniform theology of the ancient church. By the mid-second century the church was forced to reduce the number of possible interpretations by setting forth an unambiguous creed, or Rule of Faith, containing the basic rudiments of the faith. Although creed-making was practiced already during the age of the apostles, it was the appearance of second-century Gnosticism that called forth the most significant postapostolic Rules. Tertullian and Irenaeus are the most representative theologians of this period.<sup>16</sup> The *change* occurred when these fathers insisted that the Scriptures must henceforth be interpreted primarily in the light of the Rule of Faith or (as Irenaeus called it) the Canon of Truth. The change consisted in the narrow-

<sup>15</sup> Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 39, PL 2, 52.

<sup>16</sup> Albert C. Outler, "Origen and the *Regulae Fidei*," *Church History*, VIII (September 1939), 213—215, maintains there were at least six definitive Rules of Faith prior to Origen, those of Ignatius, Aristides, Justin, Tertullian, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus.



ing down of possible interpretations. The process was similar to the corresponding reductionism that produced the fixed canon of inspired writings about the same time, a process that had also been accelerated by the appearance of Gnostic writings. Put negatively, the church was basically concerned with saying no to heresy, but as the corollary to this action she also said yes to truth.

Once the Rule had been established as a reliable reflection of Scripture, it in turn was given authoritative status by Tertullian: "This Rule, taught by Christ [!] allows of no questions among us except those which heresies introduce and which make heretics."<sup>17</sup> He continues: "Provided the essence of the Rule is not disturbed, you may seek and discuss as much as you like. Faith is established in the Rule. There it has its law, and it wins salvation by keeping the law. To know nothing against the Rule is to know everything."<sup>18</sup> After this encomium, Tertullian suggests that Scripture by itself is not sufficient to ward off heretics. "It follows that we must not appeal to Scripture, and we must not contend on ground where victory is impossible or uncertain."<sup>19</sup> Thus the primary authority of Scripture was supplemented with the secondary authority of the Rule, which in turn provided the key to the correct interpretation of Scripture.

Irenaeus of Lyons discussed the relationship between Scripture and tradition in the third book of *Adversus haereses*. The faith of the church was described as a once-for-all delivery handed down from generation

to generation, or more specifically, from bishop to successor. He compared the faith to "a rich man making a deposit."<sup>20</sup> There is "one true and life-giving faith, which the church has received from the apostles and imparts to her children. For the Lord of all gave to His apostles the power of the Gospel, and by them we also have learned the truth."<sup>21</sup> The significant change is that Irenaeus identified the once-for-all faith with his own Canon of Truth. After concluding his Canon, he writes, "Having received this preaching and faith, the church, although scattered in the whole world, preserves it as if living in one house. She believes these things everywhere alike, as if she had but one heart and one soul . . . and hands them down as if she had but one mouth. For the languages of the world are different, but the meaning of the Christian tradition is one and the same."<sup>22</sup> An important feature of this addition to the body of received tradition was that the Rules themselves became authoritative tradition in the church. "One cannot discover the truth from Scripture if one does not know the tradition (i.e., Rule)."<sup>23</sup>

The fathers in no way considered this "new tradition" as differing in content from the Scriptures. They considered them to be identical in content. The Rules purported to be a condensation of the message contained in Scripture. They were thus authoritative in a derivative sense, standing under the Scriptures and faithfully reflecting their contents.

<sup>20</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 3:4:1, PG 7, 855.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 3: Praef., PG 7, 843.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:10:2, PG 7, 552.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:2:1, PG 7, 846.

<sup>17</sup> *De praescriptione haereticorum* 14, PL 2, 27.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 19, PL 2, 31.

Digressing for a moment from our attention to Rules, we see that other "new traditions" in Christianity occupied essentially the same position vis-à-vis Scripture as did the Rules. Creeds and liturgies were both held to be faithful reflections of Scriptural truth. In a sermon to catechumens Augustine wrote that "the creed is the divine words of Scripture gathered into one,"<sup>24</sup> and Cyril of Jerusalem maintained that "the Creed has been built up out of all the Scriptures, for since all cannot read the Scriptures, we comprise the faith in a few lines."<sup>25</sup> John C. Murray recently pointed out:

At Nicea the word of God in the Scriptures was regarded as the norm of the faith of the Church. Even Arius, and later Eunomius, felt it necessary to appeal to this norm, though their doctrinal systems owed nothing to Scripture. The Arian formulas were judged by this norm and condemned as false. Judged likewise by this norm, the Nicene formulas were put forward as the true faith.<sup>26</sup>

Liturgical practices were also derived from Scripture. Augustine saw in the practice of exorcism at Holy Baptism proof positive that infants were infected with original sin, since the authority of the practice lay in Scripture.<sup>27</sup> Basil of Caesarea relied

on tradition as found in the liturgy to demonstrate the full deity of the Holy Spirit, but he made it clear that the authority of the liturgy lay in the Scriptures.<sup>28</sup> The significance of these references lies in the fact that a change took place through the addition of new traditions, but the authority of the traditions (Rules, creeds, liturgy) was derived from the fact that they reflected the content of Scripture.

With respect to Rules of Faith, the following conclusions appear to be warranted:

1. The Rules were restrictive in nature, attempting to limit the possibilities of interpreting the Scriptures.
2. The change that took place was one of growth. As Rules and creeds multiplied, each generation, it seems, handed down more than it had received.
3. The fathers believed that the traditions they created were faithful to the true meaning of Scripture.
4. Changes (additions to tradition) were often necessitated by the appearance of heresies.
5. Each new tradition in turn became crystallized as authority in the church.

#### THE ERA OF THE COUNCILS

The most fruitful area of study in addressing the problem of change in the postapostolic period lies in the decisions of the first four ecumenical councils. It is primarily to these decisions that Harnack and others refer when they speak of a change from primitive ethics to metaphysical creed, from didache to dogma.

The fathers at Nicaea were determined to exclude Arianism as an acceptable interpretation of apostolic witness. In order to do this they were forced to employ the controversial term *ὁμοούσιος*, thus inject-

<sup>24</sup> Augustine, *De symbola ad catechumenos* 1:1, PL 40, 627.

<sup>25</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Orations* 5:12, PG 33, 521.

<sup>26</sup> John Courtney Murray, S. J. "The Status of the Nicene Creed as Dogma of the Church," Theological Consultation Between Representatives of the U. S. A. National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation and the Bishops' Commission for Ecumenical Affairs, July 6-7, 1965, Baltimore, Md., pub. by National Catholic Welfare Conference, Washington, D. C., pp. 18-19.

<sup>27</sup> Augustine, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 1:22, PL 44, 426.

<sup>28</sup> Basil of Caesarea, *De Spiritu Sancto* 26, 28, 66, 67, 71, PG 32, 114, 118, 187, 194, 199.

ing a non-Scriptural term into a creed that was designed to serve henceforth as a touchstone for orthodoxy. The word itself had suffered at the hands of a previous council (Antioch 264—268) and was proposed only when all other efforts to exclude the Arians had failed. The revulsion of the fathers toward the term can be seen in the immediate reaction against it following the council. Both the adoption of the *ὁμοούσιος* and the authoritative use made of the creed may be seen as introducing change in the doctrinal life of the church. The change consisted first of all in rejecting an interpretation of Scripture that was considered incompatible with the received traditions and with the totality of Scripture, thus forcing many Christians who were sympathetic to Arian ideas to change their doctrine. Second, in order to preserve the true faith, the *ὁμοούσιος* was added to the tradition and made authoritative. Third, for the first time in Christian history one single creed was held to be binding on all bishops. The change was in the nature of growth but, as stated above, the fathers were convinced that the additions that were made were in harmony with Scripture. Both Athanasius and Gregory Nazianzus state that even if the term *ὁμοούσιος* itself was not found in Scripture, its meaning was exactly that of the apostles.<sup>29</sup>

The pattern established at Nicaea, that of adopting terms not contained in Scripture to explain Scripture, was followed by subsequent councils. Without rehearsing the many complex issues involved in the Trinitarian and Christological disputes, suffice it to say that ultimately such terms as *persona*, *substantia*, *natura*, or their Greek

<sup>29</sup> Athanasius, *De decretis Nicaenae synodi* 21, PG 25, 453.

counterparts were used to make explicit the meaning of Scripture.<sup>30</sup>

At least some of the fathers were conscious of the fact that these terms represented an innovation in theological parlance, but they insisted the innovation was made for the sake of clarity. Such awareness is revealed in this statement by Gregory Nazianzus, who contributed the term "procession" to describe the relationship between the Spirit and the Father:

The Holy Ghost is truly Spirit, coming forth from the Father indeed, but not after the manner of the Son, for it is not by generation but by procession (*ἐκπορευτῶς*), since I must coin a word for the sake of clarity.<sup>31</sup>

The first four ecumenical councils provide an excellent demonstration of the process of the development of dogma, or at least of the dialectical process that was often the method of development. The Council of Nicaea affirmed as true that *Jesus Christ is God* as opposed to the Arian heresy, which held that Jesus was a creature. Following the council, however, the Apollinarians tended to overemphasize the truth of Christ's deity to the point of denying His true humanity. This caused the second great council, that of Constantinople in 381, to affirm the truth that *Jesus Christ is man*. In this way the church by 381 had reacted to heresy by affirming the two natures of Christ. The stage was set for the third great heresy when theologians began to reflect on the manner of union of the two natures. Nestorius, or at least

<sup>30</sup> One of the best examples of the use of these terms is in Tertullian's *Against Praxeas*, wherein he clearly sets forth the doctrine of the Trinity.

<sup>31</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Catechetical Oration* 39:12, PG 36, 348.

the heresy that became attached to his name, so emphasized the duality of Christ's person that he tended to deny Him personality. In opposition to this heresy the third ecumenical council, held in Ephesus in 431, affirmed that *Jesus Christ is one person*. As before, a new heresy arose when Eutyches overemphasized the orthodox position. The Eutychians held so tenaciously to the conclusions of Ephesus that they practically denied the two natures in Christ (monophysitism). The Council of Chalcedon in 451, together with Pope Leo's *Tome* and Cyril of Alexandria's Letter to Nestorius stressed as true that *Jesus Christ exists in two natures*. One looks in vain for propositions within the conciliar canons stated as simply and as basically as here given, but their effect was essentially the dialectic here outlined. Conclusions that arise from these conciliar decisions may be stated thus:

1. The Fathers developed dogmatic formulations in opposition to heresy. Dogmas functioned on two fronts: they excluded heresy and they affirmed truth.
2. The orthodoxy of one age, when overemphasized, became the heresy of the succeeding generation. Heresy was an overemphasis of a Scriptural truth.
3. The dogmatic formulations of one age were built on those of preceding ages. The decisions of Ephesus (431 A. D.) would not have been possible without those of Nicea (325 A. D.) and Constantinople (381 A. D.), and the Chalcedonian Definition rested on those of the three earlier councils.
4. The effect of conciliar decisions was defensive. They were erecting a wall against heresy. A change was necessary as each heresy emerged, because up to the time of its appearance the church had no need for the explication of the

dogma that countered the heresy. But the church found it imperative to formulate new dogma because the old forms and traditions were inadequate to the new dangers.

#### SELECTED PATRISTIC ATTITUDES TOWARD CHANGE

How did the fathers view the change or development that was taking place? We have already seen that Gregory Nazianzus did not hesitate to coin a new word. Elsewhere he offers his version of salvation history, underscoring the fact that the church progresses in its understanding of God.

The Old Testament proclaimed the Father clearly, but the Son more darkly; the New Testament plainly revealed the Son, but only indicated the deity of the Spirit. Now the Holy Spirit lives among us and makes the manifestation of Himself more certain to us; for it was not safe, so long as the divinity of the Father was still unrecognized, to proclaim openly that of the Son; and so long as this was still not accepted, to impose the burden of the Spirit, if so bold a phrase may be allowed.<sup>32</sup>

It seems that Gregory acknowledges progression in dogma, and he hints that such progression is in reality God's continued self-disclosure. Origen warned against the irrelevance of "stale" teaching:

Thus (the priests) are warned not to bring out yesterday's fare when they set about to address the people; not to set forth stale doctrines according to the letter, but by God's grace ever to bring forth new truths, ever to discover the spiritual lessons. The sacrifice of praise must be new and fresh, so that there must be no risk of your lips speaking but your mind being fruitless,

<sup>32</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Catechetical Oration* 31:26, PG 36, 161.

while you produce old teachings in the church.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps the best known patristic statement on change comes from Vincent of Lerins, whose *Commonitory* deals with the question at some length. He says, in part:

But someone will say, shall there be no progress in Christ's church? Certainly, all possible progress. For what being is there, so envious of men, so full of hatred to God, who would seek to forbid it? But on condition that it be real progress, not alteration, of the faith. For progress requires that the subject be enlarged in itself; alteration, that it be transformed into something else. The growth of religion in the soul must be analagous to the growth of the body, which though in process of years it is developed and attains full size, yet remains still the same. There is a wide difference between the flower of youth and the maturity of age; yet they who were once young are still the same now that they have become old.<sup>34</sup>

There is an apparent contradiction in the attitude of some fathers toward change, for the same writer in some cases speaks of faith as being changeless yet changing, static and dynamic. Despite Vincent's clear testimony to the progressive nature of dogma, the same writer has given the church the famous Vincentian canon, which insists that the true faith is "that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all (*quod ubique, quod semper, et quod ab omnibus creditum est*)."<sup>35</sup> The same anomaly is present in other fathers. Irenaeus, who was responsible for adding his Canon of Truth to ecclesiastical

<sup>33</sup> Origen, *In Leviticum homilia* 5:8, PG 12, 458.

<sup>34</sup> Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitorium* 23, PL 50, 667—668.

tradition, still speaks of faith as a "deposit" to be guarded. Tertullian, an innovator by virtue of his use of *persona*, *substantia*, *natura*, and *trinitas*, warns against adding to or taking from the faith.<sup>35</sup> Gregory of Nyssa's comment is especially interesting:

We must guard the tradition which we have received from the fathers as ever sure and immovable, and seek from the Lord a means of defending our faith. If this should be discovered by anyone endowed with grace, we shall give thanks to Him who granted the grace. If not, we shall nonetheless hold to our unchanging faith in those points which have been established.<sup>36</sup>

The curious feature about this statement is that the "unchangeable faith" includes Gregory's own highly complex argument on the distinctions and relationships within the godhead, explanations that were patently a progressive element in dogma.

Vincent of Lerins offers the same solution to the static/dynamic tension which had been offered by the earlier fathers. He agrees that "Scripture is complete and sufficient of itself for everything, and more than sufficient,"<sup>37</sup> but because of heresies and new circumstances it is necessary for the church to formulate new dogmas. The constant or absolute remains Scripture, but its continued interpretation is demanded by new situations.

#### DOGMA AS RESPONSE TO NEED

Explication of dogma did not take place in a vacuum. Additions to tradition were

<sup>35</sup> Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 14, PL 2, 27.

<sup>36</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Quod non sint tres Dii*, PG 45, 117.

<sup>37</sup> Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitorium* 2, PL 50, 640.

frequently made in response to specific historical situations. As new circumstances arose that promised to threaten the received tradition of the church, the fathers set about to exclude the new heresy by formulating a dogma, which in turn was accepted as a statement of Scriptural truth.

In this connection it is instructive to see the close parallel between a statement on doctrine prepared by the faculties of the Missouri Synod's two seminaries and accepted by the Committee on Doctrinal Unity and the understanding of dogma in the early church.<sup>38</sup> The statement affirms that doctrine is "*response to her* (the church's) *specific needs*. The formulation of such doctrines is conditioned by the historical situation in which the church finds itself." The statement also defines doctrine as "the church's formulation of a part of the Scriptural revelation of the will of God." The following affirmations would seem to agree with the historical realities of the early development of dogma, using dogma and doctrine as interchangeable terms:

1. Occasionally the need arises for further formulation of dogma.
2. It is the function of the church to formulate dogma.
3. The dogma formulated is a further explication of Scriptural truth.

#### A QUALIFICATION

Whereas a considerable amount of attention has been given in the present study to the dialectical nature of dogmatic formulation, it will be useful to consider a qualification of this approach offered by Jaroslav Pelikan in his presidential address at the December 1965 meeting of the American Society of Church History.

<sup>38</sup> *Lutheran Witness*, May 8, 1956, p. 178.

This interest in change takes the form of a preoccupation with doctrinal controversy and with theological speculation, to produce the impression that the development of Christian doctrine is far more erratic and fitful than it has been in fact. In any history of dogma, to be sure, a doctrine will be taken up at the point where it became a matter of controversy; then the several parties and speculative alternatives are ranged across the battlefield, the thrusts and counter-thrusts are detailed, and the eventual victory of orthodoxy is described. After that the doctrine is scarcely heard from again until some later figure decides that it is in need of speculative reconsideration. It is, of course, inevitable and proper if "development of dogma" is to be the assignment, that the historian concentrate on the origins and growth of each doctrine: one cannot be expected to rehearse what everyone has thought about everything.

Yet that does not necessarily imply that one must concentrate so exclusively on doctrinal controversy and on theological speculation, for this would be to assume that all doctrines always originate within such controversy and that they usually grow and develop as a result of speculation. Some doctrines do originate in controversy, and some grow through speculation; but others certainly do not either grow or originate in those ways. It is not good history to reserve any discussion of eucharistic theology until one comes to the ninth century in the West simply because there seems to have been relatively little speculation about the real presence and even less controversy before that time.

But if continuity is dismissed as tenacity, the true nature of the development of doctrine is inevitably distorted. For even in violent controversy and even in audacious speculation, doctrine develops out of earlier doctrine within the context of the total life of the Church in the world. And

it does not do so on the basis of "a priori" logic prescribed by the theologian, but on the basis of "a posteriori" logic to be described by the historian. Dramatic breaks and radical discontinuities there often are, but that is not tantamount to saying that they are all that is interesting about the process of development. When the process of development, rather than its legitimacy and its limits, becomes the object of historical research, the problem of the development of doctrine can be lifted, at least temporarily, from the arena of polemical theology.<sup>39</sup>

#### CONTINUITY IN CHANGE

It is beyond dispute that the early church added to the Scriptural authority the authority of tradition. Likewise there can be no question that the fathers were convinced their formulations were founded on precedents—precedents of Scripture and tradition. The change was one of growth, and the growth came about through further explications of Scripture as applied to new situations. Whether or not such formulations actually did reveal the sense of Scripture seems to be beyond the realm of historical judgment. Again, to cite John Murray:

It is hardly necessary to add that the authority of the Nicene Creed does not depend on the fact that the material identity of sense between Scripture and dogma can or cannot be established by the methods of rational hermeneutic. To say this would be to make biblical scholarship the norm of the faith of the Church — *quod absit*.<sup>40</sup>

In effect, Roman Catholic scholar Murray is asserting that it is not the theologian's

<sup>39</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, "An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine," *Church History*, XXXV (March 1966), 8—9.

<sup>40</sup> Murray, p. 21.

claim that a new formulation is Scriptural which makes it so but that it is the church's ratification of the formulation which creates doctrine. Acknowledging the fact that the problem of the church's *magisterium* bristles with difficulties, especially for a Lutheran, it seems correct to say that historically the church was always called upon, at some point, to ratify the formulations which were made upon the counsel of her interpreters of Scripture. The Missouri Synod statement cited above agrees that a doctrine is "the church's formulation." Such changes, or formulations, are made only when the church is convinced of their demonstrable continuity with the apostolic witness and of their reflection of the intended sense of the "faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). For this reason responsible and competent Biblical scholarship continues to be of central, if not crucial, significance to a church in change.

It is the Christian's conviction that, surrounding and permeating the entire process of dogmatic development, the Holy Spirit is actively guiding the church. The theological dimension of change is very well expressed by Jaroslav Pelikan:

The Christian interpretation of God's activity in the world has never been satisfied with a passion for being; it has always felt obliged to come to terms with becoming, with change, with process, with variety. And therefore the Christian doctrine of God requires the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, for He is the Agent of Change and the Ground of variety.<sup>41</sup>

St. Louis

<sup>41</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, "A Portrait of the Christian as a Young Intellectual," *The Cresset*, XXIV (June 1961), 10.