

## **Development of Doctrine and Discipline in the Christian Church.**

One of the justifications frequently offered for the adoption of same-sex blessings and partnerships by the Christian Church is that this is a legitimate outcome to the way Christian doctrine “develops” over time. Just because such new practices go against consistent Church teaching for 2000 years, and even against explicit Scriptural injunction—so the argument goes -- that does not necessarily make them unfaithful, because, after all, “doctrine develops” and always has.

Some of the precedents offered for such purported development are the following:

- The inclusion of uncircumcised Gentiles in the first Christian Church, and the abrogation of various Old Testament purity regulations. This is dealt with at the “Jerusalem council” described in Acts 15.
- The relatively recent abandonment by the Church of slavery as contrary to the Gospel, even though slavery was permitted in the Old and New Testament.
- Women’s ordination.

In addition, examples of “doctrinal development” cited include the Trinitarian and Christological definitions from the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century Councils, which use language that is not Scriptural and make claims about Christ that go beyond Scripture.

Finally, legitimate “doctrinal development” has been used to justify a number of “catholic” doctrines and devotions (held by some Anglicans and certainly by the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox), e.g. Immaculate Conception and Assumption of Mary, Prayers for the Dead, invocation of saints, and (in the Roman Catholic case) universal Papal primacy.

### **Unacceptable understandings of “development”**

But in fact, the notion of “development” has been used in a number of very different ways, by different groups. “Development” has meant, variously:

- ***new revelations*** from God that supplement, go beyond, or even supplant Scripture. (This has been a claim made e.g. by Mormons, and by some claiming that “new science” and “learning” must set aside Scriptural or previously held Christian teachings.)
- ***new holiness***, that either provides individuals or groups with the capacities to understand Scripture in new ways or to live its teachings in new ways or to do away with Scripture altogether as no longer necessary to a new spiritual existence. (This claim has been made by a host of special “prophets”, like Ellen White of the Adventists, charismatic communities like the Shakers, and apocalyptic and pneumatic communities like the Spiritual Franciscans of the Middle Ages.)

Development, in these two cases, is tied with a view that a “new time” has dawned, in which the Holy Spirit is working in a new way with certain people. The famous 2<sup>nd</sup> century sect of Montanists exhibited this conviction.

In any case, both the “new revelations” and the “new holiness” ways of viewing development have been judged “heretical” by the larger Church. That is because both are generally cut loose from the defining and unsurpassable revelation of God in Christ Jesus that the Church has always used as the touchstone of its teaching.

### **Acceptable understandings of “development”**

There are, however, other ways of viewing “development” in teaching and discipline that have been acceptable to churches. Broadly, there is development as:

- *the unfolding in time of the core of revelation*, as it is progressively understood by the united Church in changing historical circumstances. Catholic theologians like J. H. Newman and Henri Blondel have argued this.
- *the recasting or rearticulating of the deposit of revelation* according to the varying modes of speaking given in diverse times and places and cultures. This has been a generally acceptable Protestant way of dealing with variations and changes in doctrine and discipline over history.

These two ways of looking at development above tend to be Scripture-oriented and Scripture-judged. And they have been accepted in various ways by many traditional Christian churches.

- We should finally note that there is also a “*counter-tradition*” of “*decline*”. This views the Church’s life (and sometimes teaching) not in terms of “progressive” development”, but in terms of “negative development”, that is, in terms of “decline. This view was held by some early Christian thinkers, by a number of Medieval theologians, and by a host of Reformation and post-Reformation Christian thinkers. On this view, we should expect the Church over time to become increasingly corrupt, and must therefore be alert to “guard” the deposit of revelation and faith, and where necessary “reform” the church in order to maintain its faithfulness to the original teaching. Many Protestants and some Catholics to this day believe this.

### **Anglican understandings of “development”**

Anglicanism’s Scriptural touchstone is congruent in certain respects to both the “positive” and “negative” views of development outlined above as “acceptable”. That is, the primary teaching of Scripture is to be adapted to various times and places, sometimes in order to “learn more”, sometimes in order to “hold fast”, sometimes in order to “reform” corruptions.

A number of key documents for Anglicans – especially American Episcopalians – emphasize this point.

- First, the Preface to the 1549 Prayer Book speaks to the need to reform corruptions in the Church for the sake of reestablishing the authority of the Scriptures.
- Second, the 39 Articles (e.g. 6, 20, 21, 24) speak to the primary authority of the Scriptures, to the Church’s responsibility to live “under” Scripture, to the failures of the Church in doing so and the need to reform accordingly, and to the adaptability of certain disciplinary forms of life according to times and places.
- Thirdly, these aspects are summarized in the current Preface to the American Prayer Book.
- Fourthly, the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, while acknowledging an acceptable “variety of modes of worship and discipline [and] traditional customs”, also speaks of Scripture as the “rule and ultimate standard of faith” for the Church, and refers to a “substantial deposit of Christian Faith and Order” committed to the Church “unto the end of the world”, that is “incapable of compromise or surrender”.
- Finally, the Catechism to the American Prayer Book affirms that while “the Holy Spirit [...] leads us into all truth and enables us to grow in the likeness of Christ”, it is also the case that “we recognize truths to be taught by the Holy Spirit when they are in accord with the Scriptures”.

In all, Anglicanism has seen “development” in terms of the historical manifestation of varying modes of worship and discipline, and perhaps even teaching in some regards. Such limited development is directed by the Holy Spirit, but always discernable and acceptable only to the degree that this diversity is congruent with Scripture. It cannot rely on selective readings of Scripture, but rather on a “coherent” reading of Scripture that does not pit one text against another. This has always demanded some kind of common or communal agreement, which is why Anglicanism has always worked according to the decisions of synods and councils, the larger the better. This represents the view of Communion held by the Windsor Report.

This Anglican understanding fits well with what Scripture itself says about the Holy Spirit “leading us into all truth” (John 16:13). For Jesus explicitly describes this leading in terms of bringing us *back* to the actual words of Jesus, not leading us into “new” things (cf. John 14:26; 16:14). In this way, the Spirit “develops” the Church by empowering it to become more faithful to the actual spoken commands of Jesus (cf. 14:18ff.), even through the work of “judgment” (16:8ff.). This may well involve understanding Scripture in ways not previously grasped (cf. the famous story of the road to Emmaus and after, Luke 24:27, 32, 45f.); but such understanding is always “in accord” with the actual meaning of Scripture from the beginning (“from Moses on”).

## **What Developments Anglicanism Has Accepted**

If we look at the “precedents” of “development” of “new” doctrine and discipline cited by proponents of gay inclusion, we can see that none of these elements were ever viewed as going “beyond” the given revelation of Scripture as received by the Church.

- the inclusion of the Gentiles was justified on the basis of the Old Testament (Noachic covenant and Leviticus laws for Gentiles), not to mention the explicit promises of the prophets. (Also the words of Jesus.) Whatever “revelation” Peter received, it was wholly tested by Scripture.
- On the question of slavery, it is the case that there are numerous places in the New Testament where the revelation of Christ is said to undercut the distinction between slave and free, and place people on an equal footing before God. While it took some time for the Christian Church to recognize the social significance of this revelation, it is a fact that slavery was generally outlawed by the Western Church by the early Middle Ages, and was revived only against its own teaching and understanding of Scripture in the 16<sup>th</sup> century because of a host of forces historians still seek to understand.
- The case of women’s ordination helpfully distinguishes the Anglican from the Roman Catholic approach to “development”. The Anglican Communion, through various conciliar mechanisms, determined that Scripture had no conclusive teaching forbidding women’s ordination, and thus permitted divergent local practices within the Communion according to a spirit of charity and discerning reception. The Roman Catholic Church, however, although they too reached the same conclusion regarding the inconclusiveness of Scriptural teaching on the matter (cf. the 1976 Pontifical Biblical Commission Report), has insisted that other, non-Scripturally explicit factors prohibit women’s ordination. The Scriptural test remains central for Anglicanism.
- The other matters of “doctrinal development” tied to the Church’s creedal definitions have always been seen by Anglicans, not as going beyond Scripture, so much as providing a way that Scripture itself can properly be read coherently. This has been the claim of Anglican theologians since the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

## **Conclusion**

In this light, let us address the question of whether the Christian Church’s potential affirmation of same-sex behavior represents an acceptable form of “development” within the Anglican Church. Certainly, it must be rejected if it is claimed to represent a “new revelation” or the permission of a “new age”. But is it an acceptable form of the Scripture’s local reception and adaptation? The test is whether same-sex affirmation is congruent with a coherent reading of Scripture, in its explicit teachings or permissions, as received within the general hearing of the Communion.

According to this test, the claim to “development” must fail. Jesus’ words regarding marriage as linked to the account of creation in Genesis (e.g. Mark 10:6ff), and Paul’s discussion of same-sex activity in Rom. 1:18ff., place the whole question of sexuality in

a universal historical realm that does not admit of moral adaptation. Jesus sees the male-female distinction, embodied in marriage, as being “from the beginning” in God’s eyes; and Paul sees the distortion of this relation as something characterizing the Fall, quite apart from the specific revelations of the Old Testament laws. Nothing “new” is to be learned or applied locally.

Given these clear Scriptural discussions (along with others), the test of “non-repugnance” must come into play: do the proposed changes in the Church’s teaching on sexuality place Scripture at odds with itself? Lambeth 1998 made the judgment that such changes are not coherent with Scripture. In so doing, they reiterated what the larger Church catholic has taught and continues to teach.

**If there is to be appropriate “development” around this issue, it must be one of reforming those Anglican churches that have permitted what Scripture, as heard by the Church consistently, does not permit.**