

SBJT Forum

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SBJT: IS IT LEGITIMATE TO THINK OF DOCTRINE “DEVELOPING” IN CHURCH HISTORY?

Michael A. G. Haykin: In various spheres of human knowledge, such as astronomy and medicine, the passage of centuries has brought obvious and clear advances in understanding. Can the same be said with regard to doctrinal development in church history? Has the passage of time brought about greater insight into the various facets of biblical truth? While it sometimes seems as if the church has failed to own hard-won theological explications from the past, I think the answer to this question has to be a qualified affirmative.

The determination of the canon of the NT, for example, is a fabulous example in this regard. While the Ancient Church did not create the NT, it was led by the Spirit to recognize those books that had been inspired by the Spirit’s inbreathing. But this did not happen all at once. The first three centuries of church history witnessed an extensive war over the contents of the canon as Gnosticism created its own authoritative works such as the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Philip. Confusing matters even further were adherents of what was called “the New Prophecy,” also known as Montanism, in which the sayings of various prophets and prophetesses were taken to be fresh revelation on a level with Holy Scripture. The church’s determination of the boundaries of the NT—the twenty-seven books now in our Bibles—was essentially complete by the close of the fourth century. And the church has never revisited this issue, notwithstanding, for example, Martin Luther’s low view of the letter of James because he wrongly thought it

contradicted Paul's view of salvation as by faith alone. Luther's view was not followed and was viewed as an aberration.

The conclusion of the debates about the Trinity in the creedal affirmation of Niceno-Constantinopolitan statement of faith is another good example in this regard. Here were laid down for all time the core lineaments of what the church believes about the Godhead: that God, though one, yet subsists in three consubstantial persons—the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. The controversies and debates that had led to this creedal statement stretched all the way back to the second century when Irenaeus refuted the Gnostic understanding of God and Tertullian replied to modalism. The fourth century, of course, had seen an intensification of these debates about the Godhead as the Alexandrian elder, Arius, and others denied the full deity of Christ and the Spirit, and such champions of biblical truth as Athanasius, Hilarly of Poitiers, Basil of Caesarea, and Didymus the Blind were raised up to hammer out the Bible's Trinitarian truth on the anvil of controversy. The later addition of the *filioque* in the Latin church of Western Europe to the third article of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (now simply known as the Nicene Creed) in no way takes away from the Trinitarian achievement of the fourth-century Fathers.

Yet again, the debates about the nature of salvation in the sixteenth century bought to head discussions that had been going since Augustine's doctrinal fight with Pelagius in the fourth century and Macarius' homiletical reflections on the believer's battle against indwelling sin in the same era. Throughout the medieval era, the affirmation that salvation is by faith alone and grace alone was never considered heretical, though few made it. It was in the Reformation era that the die was cast and Christians in Western Europe were forced to make a decision on this issue. The Reformers reached back to both the Bible and earlier Christian authors to declare the dogma that innately sinful men, women, and children are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Although that decision was rejected by a significant section of the church in the West—which became in a real sense the Roman Catholic Church—it is a determination that has been rightly viewed as a landmark of the same importance as the earlier decision regarding the Trinity in the fourth century.

So there has been development and growth. And it is only by walking along these "ancient paths" (Jer 6:16), ardently mapped out by believers of bygone generations, that the church can remain mature and useful to her God.

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twenty years taught courses on the ancient church, both for university and college undergraduates and seminary students. And one of the unfailing phenomena of such classes is the confusion and disturbance which the disparity between the faith as articulated in modern churches, be they of the Lutheran, Reformed, or Evangelical variety, and the writings, debates, priorities, and terminology of the church in the early centuries. If the truth does not change and the way of salvation is always the same, why do our churches speak in ways so different to those of the early centuries?

This type of question touches on the classic problem of the relationship between history and theology. Anyone who compares the church of the Book of Acts to the church in ages since sees there are great differences. How do we account for this?

The classic approach, articulated for example by Irenaeus, a second century writer, is to see the church as originally united on its doctrinal commitments but torn apart by heretics who deviated from the faith. For Irenaeus, the genealogy of heresy tracked back to Simon Magus who was confronted by Peter in Acts 8. He was the archetypal heretic from whom all later deviants took their cue. Change was thus a function of decline; the sharper and clearer definitions of orthodoxy merely a response to these assaults on the faith.

Irenaeus may be long dead but the basic principle of his theory are arguably the default position of many Protestants, including many biblical scholars, who think that the Faith can simply be deduced from the Bible without reference to the history of doctrine—a history, after all, only made necessary by those

SBJT: REFLECT FOR US ON WHY HISTORICAL THEOLOGY IS VITALLY IMPORTANT IN A THEOLOGICAL CURRICULUM AND FOR THE LIFE AND HEALTH OF THE CHURCH. ALSO, HELP US THINK THROUGH HOW WE SHOULD THINK OF DOCTRINAL DEVELOPMENT IN CHURCH HISTORY.

Carl R. Trueman: Though an early modernist by training, I have for over

who deviated from the truth. Orthodoxy was there at the start; everything else is either heresy or a clarification called forth in response to heresy.

Walter Bauer famously rejected this idea of an original pristine Christianity and saw orthodoxy merely as the belief system of the winners in the conflicts of the early church, a position which enjoys popular vigor today through the work of such as Bart Ehrman and Elaine Pagels. This view has been persuasively critiqued by Andreas Köstenberger and Michael Kruger in their book, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy*. But one does not have to accept the radical historicism of an Ehrman to feel the pinch of the problem: the formulation of Christian doctrine changes over time; views that were acceptable in the third century (for example, a subordinationist view of the Logos) come to be deemed heretical by the end of the fourth. How do we account for this? And, to make the question more general: if Christianity is an historical faith, passed from generation to generation, how are we to relate that past to the church's present?

It was the nineteenth century, with its new sensitivity to questions of history and historical consciousness that really helped to clarify this issue. Indeed, in 1845 two books were published which addressed this topic: John Henry Newman's *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* and Philip Schaff's *The Principle of Protestantism*. The former, written while Newman was still an Anglican but not published until he had swum the Tiber, earned scorn from conservative Roman Catholics such as Orestes Brown. The latter, originating as Schaff's Inaugural Lecture at the seminary at Mercersburg, earned him a heresy trial. In both cases each man met the response that church teaching did not change over time. Yet 175 years later, it is clear that it was Newman and Schaff, not their opponents, who had both identified the key issue of doctrinal development over time and attempted honest responses to it.

Today, nobody competently schooled in church history would argue that fully-orbed Trinitarianism can be read straight from the pages of the NT; but no competent theologian would argue that Trinitarianism is not of vital importance for the Faith. The path from the text of scripture to the Nicene Creed and beyond is a complicated one but that only underlines how important it was for the church to come to the right formulation regarding God.

This is where church history and historical theology become so important. If we are, in Paul's words, to hold fast to forms of sound words,

if we are to recognize sayings that are worthy of all acceptance, if we are, in short, to place ourselves within the tradition of orthodox, catholic thinking, we need to understand how and why the church has come to think the way she does. And that cannot be done simply by exegesis. That is really the method that liberal theologians use—isolating the biblical text from the history of commentary and doctrinal synthesis. That we might come to traditional conclusions by such a method does not validate the method itself. Indeed, it might merely indicate that we are unconsciously dependent upon the tradition of orthodoxy, indulging in a kind of benign parasitism. That is rather like those who claim to repudiate all tradition and simply hold to the Bible and yet always use the Bible in translation, blissfully unaware that translations always stand in positive connection to textual, linguistic, and lexicographical traditions.

Recent years have seen a resurgence in interest in historical theology, patristic, medieval, Reformation, and post-Reformation. The debates on the eternal subordination of the Son in 2016 caused many of us to sharpen and clarify our thinking as we came to understand more fully why certain positions had been ruled as not acceptable in the early church. The doctrines of divine simplicity and its corollaries, immutability and impassibility, are currently being rescued from the old Harnackian canard of Hellenistic perversion. And the relationship between Protestantism and the Middle Ages is being remapped by those who have taken the time to find out what theologians such as Aquinas were really trying to say. All of this should be grounds for great encouragement and should highlight the significance of history to the theological curriculum.

Yet there has to be a further move: Protestants need a theory of development, or at least a set of rules by which development can be understood and evaluated. It is not enough simply to believe that those ideas which have gripped the imagination of Christian churches over time are true. That would end up being at best merely a Protestant version of the Canon of Vincent of Lerins, at worst a rehashed and modified version of the Irenaean approach, a kind of antiquarianism dressed up as orthodoxy. We need to think long and hard about the dynamics of doctrinal development in order to respond to the challenges posed by Rome and by the Eastern Orthodox.

Thoughtful young Protestant Christians are living in an age which provides them without historical roots in general; many of them turn to the

church to offer such. To the extent that Protestantism cannot offer them an account of the obvious historical rootedness of their Faith, to that extent they will continue to be confused by church history and attracted to traditions such as Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy, that do have answers to the historical questions they ask. We need to take church history seriously; and we need to find a way to integrate its findings into the exegetical, systematic, homiletical, and liturgical life of our churches.

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SBJT: TODAY, EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY IS SPEAKING A LOT ABOUT THEOLOGICAL “RETRIEVAL.” REFLECT ON THE NATURE AND IMPORTANCE OF “RETRIEVAL” FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY AND CHRISTOLOGY.

Michael A. Wilkinson: For some, theological retrieval is a harbinger of decline: a fascination with the old and obscure that will distract the church from the clear and central doctrines of the faith. For others, it is the hope of a future for the church that is both anchored in ancient tradition and renewed by it for theological flourishing. Either way, most see theological retrieval as a contemporary movement that explores the roots and branches of Christian tradition with the expectation (warranted or not) that it will yield better fruit in the church today.

A few years of working in Trinitarian theology and Christology has shown me that, in its most basic sense, theological retrieval is not new. The church has always looked to the past to see the best way forward. Every generation has stood on the shoulders of those before them, relying on the theological insights of one tradition or another to remain faithful to the apostolic tradition and the teachings of Scripture. Throughout church history, some form of theological retrieval has been the norm. Even with the Reformation cry of *sola Scriptura!* ringing in their ears and resounding in their hearts and minds, the Reformed Orthodox did not invent a system of Protestant theology but constructed it, building on the foundation of Scripture and within an orthodox framework inherited from the medieval

and early churches.¹ In relation to this trajectory, what is new in only the last couple of centuries is the decline of an ancient practice that has aided the church's understanding and confession of the faith. So I think of theological retrieval today not as new but as a *renewal*, characterized by a self-conscious embrace of a lost ecclesial pattern that is good and necessary for the church's worship and witness.

If this is true, we should think carefully about a recovery of retrieval.² As I see it, theological retrieval is both promising and perilous. Beyond a renewed passion for historical theology, the church will need to ground its interaction with the past in sound first principles. An ungrounded and uncritical approach, even with the best intentions, can do more harm than good. But a sober and sound application of theological categories to prolegomenal issues can help the church leverage its theological heritage and maximize its theological efforts. Moreover, I think we can learn *how* to do theological retrieval well by attending to the early church's practice, i.e., retrieving theological retrieval.

I think it is helpful to focus on two elements. Theological retrieval today needs a theology of retrieval and a corresponding methodology. Dissertating at the intersection of Trinitarian theology, Christology, and anthropology has helped me to think through a few central concerns when attempting to learn from the theological insights of prior generations and apply them to new theological questions and contexts. For example: How do we remain submitted (in confession and practice) to the supremacy of Scripture while listening to and learning from what others have said about the substance of Scripture? How do we hold steadfastly to orthodoxy while engaging both majority and minority voices that contributed to its formation? How do we interact with a range of traditions without ignoring or adopting their problematic parts and presuppositions? Questions like these can be multiplied and nuanced. But I think we can make good progress by beginning with a dogmatic definition of retrieval and then considering a sound methodology to regulate its practice.

RECOVERING RETRIEVAL: DEFINITION

The early church did not need to contemplate the nature and importance of theological retrieval. In the first centuries, retrieval was a theological instinct, not the product of deliberation. Rather than hearing the early church discuss

and define retrieval, we see them doing it. This will be quite instructive when we consider methodology. But perhaps the most efficient route to defining retrieval is to think about it dogmatically. That is, we can reason from certain established doctrines to outline a working definition.

In my dissertation, one approach that has been particularly helpful regarding the definition of retrieval is the Reformed program sketched out by Michael Allen and Scott Swain in *Reformed Catholicity* (Baker Academic, 2015). There they use the *principia* of Reformed Orthodoxy to provide a theologically rich definition of tradition and demonstrate the biblical call for the church to actively engage in the making of tradition. Their “manifesto” begins by placing tradition in a Trinitarian context: Reformed prolegomena establishes the relationship between the Triune God (ontological principle) who reveals himself, the textual form (external cognitive principle) of that self-revelation that climaxes in Christ, and the Spirit (internal cognitive principle) who uses that textual revelation to teach the church of Christ. And from these main *principia*, Allen and Swain draw a fourth: the elicitive principle of theology is the church’s tradition, in which the church draws out conclusions from the infallible source of Scripture by the unfailing tutelage of the Spirit.

Working within this kind of a Reformed framework, I think we can define tradition dogmatically according to four points ultimately related to God’s self-revelation. First, regarding *Scripture* itself, tradition is grounded in the written word of God, dependent upon its inerrant revelation and submissive to its magisterial authority. Second, regarding *reflection* on Scripture, tradition is the process whereby the church reasons into a fuller knowledge of God. This process is the “good, true, and glorious tradition,” described by Herman Bavinck as “the method by which the Holy Spirit causes the truth of Scripture to pass into the consciousness and life of the church” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, I.4.493-94). In this dynamic sense, tradition is the theological task authorized by Christ and enabled by his Spirit.³ Third, regarding the *result* of reflecting on Scripture, tradition is the product of the Spirit’s work as teacher in the church of Christ. The processes of tradition (e.g., preaching, teaching, liturgy) lead to the products of tradition (e.g., creeds, confessions, commentaries) as two aspects of the same theological task given to the church by Christ to be accomplished by the pedagogical grace of his Spirit. In this sense, the teachings of the church are a divine-human phenomenon.

And so, fourth, regarding the *status* of the results of reflecting on Scripture, tradition bears genuine ecclesial authority as a necessary instrument in God's plan of revelation and redemption.

How does such a dogmatic definition of *tradition* help us with a definition of *retrieval*? By understanding the nature and purpose of tradition in its proper relation to the Scriptures of God and the theological task of the church, we can begin to formulate the nature and purpose of retrieving tradition. Regarding Scripture and the process of tradition, we can say that the church engages in theological reflection in obedience to its Lord, whereby renewed reason synthesizes and internalizes the truth of Scripture for active and intelligent fellowship with God. Regarding the product of tradition and its status, we can say that the teachings of the church evidence the teachings of the Spirit, who leads the church to live according to the Scriptures. The church, then, should heed its own confessional documents throughout the generations, subject to the absolute authority and judgment of the Scriptures.

So far, this kind of dogmatic coordination of Scripture and tradition is true and good and brings us closer to a sound theology of retrieval. However, its particular strength can become a weakness if we do not add some crucial qualifications. The primary benefit of a dogmatic definition is to identify tradition's primary location in the economy of God's grace. This location makes clear that before it is anything else, tradition is God-centered: God initiates, authorizes, enables, and sustains the church's renewed reasoning from Scripture into a deeper fellowship with him. Most fundamentally, then, the church's tradition is not the church's creation. When accomplished within the divine economy, the church's theological tradition bears the marks of Christ's authority and the Spirit's pedagogy.

Yet one risk inherent in this dogmatic approach is making a category error when considering the nature and function of Scripture and tradition. We need to be self-conscious, clear-minded, and consistent with the difference between inspiration and illumination. The Scriptures and tradition are both divine-human creations. However, each involves a different mode and purpose of God's self-disclosure.

In the *completed work of inspiration*, the Spirit superintended the divine-human process of *inscripturation* to produce the *fixed and inerrant words of God* in written human words that bear *divine* authority.

In the *ongoing process of illumination*, the Spirit superintends the divine-human process of *traditioning* to produce a *progressive and imperfect witness of the church* that bears *ecclesial* authority.

So a dogmatic definition of retrieval must be grounded in this distinction: the inspired Scriptures are inerrant and infallible as the source of theology; the illuminated tradition of the church is imperfect and fallible as the goal of theology.⁴ Tradition's imperfection and fallibility do not remove its authority, but they do modulate it from magisterial to ministerial. We must maintain this relation and distinction between Scripture and tradition if we are to submit to the former with the help of the latter.

Moreover, a dogmatic approach to tradition and retrieval allows us to see the real significance of the typical taxonomy employed in the Protestant practice of theology. Doing theology in accordance with *sola Scriptura* recognizes levels in ecclesial authority.⁵ The benefit of such a taxonomy is not merely ranking sources for doing theology today but determining deference when retrieving theology from the past. The rank indicates the revelatory mode of the authority and its relative position in the pedagogical economy of the Spirit. Scripture ranks first as the inerrant *norma normans* and demands the church's submission in all of its traditioning. Among the *norma normata* of tradition, creeds deserve the most deference due to the providential efficacy of illumination during the first centuries of traditioning which produced the central orthodoxies of the church. Thereafter, different groups defer to their traditional confessions as accurate and helpful summaries of the faith. And learned *theologoumena* in each tradition can help the church understand and articulate various issues, deserving respect without requiring affirmation.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this definition of tradition remains abstract until we distinguish between general ecclesial authority and specific dogmatic authority. Without getting into specifics, I think it is helpful to recognize that (a) all tradition that truly derives from Scripture as its external cognitive principle has some biblical authority, but (b) not all biblical authority is equally "biblical." To be "biblical," tradition must do more than treat the Bible as the ultimate authority; it also must read the Bible on its own terms in making theological conclusions.⁶ Furthermore, tradition's usefulness in contemporary application depends upon the "extensibility" of its biblical basis. Some doctrines simply are not suitable for application outside the

traditional boundaries because the biblical presentation circumscribes their meaning and significance. However, the biblical basis for other doctrines allows or even encourages broader application. So tradition's dogmatic authority for constructive application begins with some measure of ecclesial authority and deference and rises or falls in practice according to the nature and strength of its Scriptural support.

With this dogmatically coordinated and properly qualified relationship between Scripture and tradition, we can attempt a working definition of theological retrieval in two parts. First, as a disposition, retrieval is the desire to steward the dominical gift of tradition by active and appropriate kinds of deference for the purpose of opening up theological discourse (not closing it down). Second, as a practice, retrieval is part of the dominical task of theology, reasoning from Scripture on its own terms by engaging and assessing different levels of tradition to aid contemporary formulation.

Even with such a promising definition, however, theological retrieval remains perilous without sound principles to regulate its practice.

RECOVERING RETRIEVAL: METHODOLOGY

Perhaps the best way to gain methodological insights is to study the church's theological retrieval during its most important theological efforts. Specifically, I think it is instructive to consider how the early church appropriated Trinitarian orthodoxy in its development of Christological orthodoxy.

Trinitarian Orthodoxy: Establishing the Person-Nature Distinction

In the fourth century, the church found itself in need of a new vocabulary to protect the unity of the church and the faithfulness of its witness. Without diving into the details, we can safely say that such unity and faithfulness ultimately came to rest on a terminological development and distinction. To confess the oneness of God, the church came to use *ousia* (nature); to confess the threeness of God, the church came to use *hypostasis* (person). The process, however, was not direct and unhindered. Many disputes and disputants arose as different groups used different concepts and terms to explain the biblical presentation of God. Almost all parties agreed on the canonical contents of Scripture and made their arguments from Scripture. Moreover, they generally confessed that God is a "differentiated unity." But

the parties did not agree on the basis for this unity and distinction. And they often employed the same or similar terms to communicate disparate and even diverging concepts.

Yet by considering terminological strengths and weaknesses in relation to the confession demanded by Scripture, the church was able to craft the person-nature distinction. Through modification, the former synonyms of *ousia* and *hypostasis* were separated so that the former would continue to signify the one common divine substance and the latter would refer to the three divine personal subjects. Through translation, a family of Greek and Latin terms were brought into alignment to form an integrated family of terms that serves the church's confession of the one triune God: three divine persons (*hypostaseis-prosopa-personae*) subsist in the one divine nature (*ousia-physis-natura*).

Establishing the person-nature distinction, of course, was much more complex. In fact, the issues and terms would continue to be refined in the medieval, Reformation, and post-Reformation periods. But the point here is that when faced with confusion and heresy, the church worked with the best tools available to form a linguistic-conceptual apparatus of orthodoxy—an apparatus capable of formulating a doctrine of the Trinity that is faithful to the Bible's own terms, clear enough to aid the church's worship and witness, and precise enough to cut off heresies that would harm it.

Christological Development: Extending the Person-Nature Distinction

In the fifth century, the church again faced the need for doctrinal clarity and precision, this time regarding the divinity and humanity of Christ. Rather than create a new linguistic-conceptual apparatus, however, the church would extend the person-nature distinction from God to the God-man. As before, the process involved many disputes and disputants, each group bringing its own concepts and terms freighted with different metaphysical meaning and theological significance. Yet one thing was different: the church had established as orthodox the pro-Nicene tradition of three *hypostaseis* in one *ousia*. And this orthodox ontology came to govern the church's confession of the divine Son's incarnation into our humanity.

In short, the early church retrieved Trinitarianism from the fourth century and applied it to Christology in the fifth and subsequent centuries. For the purpose of recovering the church's theological retrieval, I have found

it helpful to consider both the successes and the failures. Here is a brief illustration that will illuminate the church's basic course and concerns in its development of Christological orthodoxy.⁷

Leading up to Chalcedon in 451, different groups attempted to locate the unity and diversity in Christ in more and less successful ways. The most prominent unsuccessful (and ultimately heretical) positions were: Apollinarianism, which denied a complete soul in Christ; Nestorianism, which added a second person in Christ; and monophysitism, which mixed the divine and human natures into something that is neither one. The Chalcedonian Definition would reject these teachings because their metaphysical significance would have unbiblical implications. To be successful, any formulation of the incarnation had to faithfully confess the teachings of Scripture regarding the unity of Christ, the fullness of his divinity and humanity, and the salvation he accomplished because of both. Only then would it matter that the formulation was also clear and coherent.

To locate successfully the unity and diversity in Christ, the Chalcedonian fathers adapted orthodox ontology. Specifically, they used the person-nature distinction to make metaphysical sense of God the Son as a man. Rather than creating a theological *novum* for the moment, the Chalcedonian fathers explicitly affirmed the Nicene Creed and worked within its ontological categories as refined in the pro-Nicene tradition. Moreover, when anti-Chalcedonian groups challenged the Definition, pro-Chalcedonian theologians worked with the Definition's terms and within its Nicene-Trinitarian framework to demonstrate the coherence of confessing Christ as one *hypostasis* (person) in two *ousiai* (natures).

Yet some pro-Chalcedonians were not as successful as others. For example, in the early sixth century, John the Grammarian⁸ attempted to defend the Definition by retrieving the Cappadocian tradition that was so instrumental in establishing Trinitarian orthodoxy. The Cappadocian fathers had argued for the particularity of the divine persons in distinction from their common essence. As Basil the Great wrote to Terentius, "*ousia* has the same relation to *hypostasis* as the common has to the particular." In his Trinitarian context, Basil was arguing that the particular idioms (identifying characteristics) of each divine person distinguish them from the single-same nature they share. Thus, there was some connection between personhood and particularity. In his retrieval, however, John seems to have reduced personhood to

particularity and applied this concept in his own Christological context. To deny that the human nature of Christ introduced a second, human person, John denied that Christ's human nature had any particular idioms. Denying human idioms, of course, would deny the real existence of Christ's human nature, which would make our salvation impossible. With the intention of preserving the Chalcedonian unity of Christ, John's *misapplication* of the person-nature distinction would have denied the real and full humanity of Christ. His general acceptance of orthodox ontology did not automatically lead its successful application in a new theological context.

In contrast, other pro-Chalcedonians made successful use of the person-nature distinction to defend the Definition's coherence. Most importantly, the distinction's constructive capacity for Christology was explored by Leontius of Byzantium and Leontius of Jerusalem⁹ in the sixth and Maximus the Confessor in the seventh century. The Leontioi realized that Christ's human nature must have particular idioms. And they insisted that the human idioms remained located in the human nature. As with the human nature itself, its particular idioms became the full possession of the divine person of the Son (Logos) by assumption, not transformation. Leontius of Byzantium argued that Christ's human idioms did not separate the human nature from the Logos but from other human beings. And Leontius of Jerusalem began clarifying the identity of the *hypostasis* in Christ with the Logos of the Trinity. Moreover, the Leontioi grounded the unity of Christ in the proper relation of person to nature: while every *ousia* has a *hypostasis*, the human *ousia* of Christ never existed apart from its *hypostatic* existence in the Logos. In this sense, the *anhypostatic* human nature did not introduce a second, human person into Christ.¹⁰

In the seventh century, Maximus the Confessor brought the person-nature distinction to its maximal application in Christology. Building on the work of the Leontioi (and other pro-Chalcedonians), he insisted that the proper distinction and relation between person and nature was indispensable for a coherent Christology that is faithful to the Scriptures. More than his predecessors, Maximus crystalized the identity of the divine, eternal Logos as the *hypostasis*-person-acting subject of both the divine and human natures in Christ. Even where the otherwise helpful Second Council of Constantinople left the impression that natures act, Maximus argued consistently with Trinitarian doctrine that person is the *who* of the nature (the *what*). It is

the person who acts through the nature. And this emphasis on the Logos as the personal, acting subject of his human nature then enabled Maximus to demonstrate that Christ has two wills (dyothelitism).¹¹ Since every other human nature has a human will, then the fully human nature assumed by the Logos must also have a human will.

Moreover, in his Chalcedonian defense of dyothelitism, the Confessor would construct an entire physiology of the will. Drawing from the analogy between God and man made in God's image, Maximus brought the will into a full-fledged capacity of the nature. Working with the person-nature distinction first in Nicene Trinitarianism and then with its analogical counterpart in the human being of Christ, Maximus was able to argue that *hypostasis* is the personal "willer" of the natural will, establishing technical terms to make necessary distinctions between divine and human willing.

The Confessor's defense of Chalcedon and his argument for dyothelitism was complex and comprehensive. But the point here is that Maximus, like the Leontioi before him, worked within the confines of orthodox ontology to defend the coherence of Chalcedonian Christology. And this new application helped the church to both refute new (or at least resurgent) heresies and improve its understanding of the divine Son's incarnation into our humanity for our salvation. In fact, it is precisely because Maximus rightly understood the categories of orthodox ontology and extended them consistently and constructively into new areas that his theological retrieval was so successful.

In summary, I think we can say that the early church remained anchored in Scripture and consistent with orthodoxy while constructing its contemporary formulations as needed. When faced with confusion and new theological issues, the church did not abandon its tradition but adapted it from confession of God to confession of the God-man. Rather than innovate, the church remained committed to the linguistic-conceptual apparatus of orthodoxy *as the means by which* it could make the best sense of God the Son's incarnation into our humanity according to the Scriptures. Concerned with the implications at the intersection of Trinitarianism, Christology, anthropology, and soteriology, the church adapted its orthodox ontology to confess that the Son (person) redeemed sinners as God (in and through the one divine nature) and as a man (in and through his real and fully human nature). This extension of Trinitarian orthodoxy enabled the church to flourish in its formulation of Christological orthodoxy, reasoning from

Scripture into a deeper fellowship with the triune God and developing its confession of the faith into a more compelling case for orthodox Christianity.

CONCLUSION

So what can we learn from a recovery of early church retrieval?

First, we can see confirmation of our dogmatic definition of retrieval. The church instinctively engaged in the dominical task of theology by appropriating its own Trinitarian tradition in reasoning from Scripture on its own terms to develop a Christological orthodoxy grounded in the person-nature distinction. Second, I want to suggest a few first principles for *how* the church can recover and continue theological retrieval that is faithful and fruitful.

(1) Retrieval should be “biblical.” As part of the theological task, retrieval should be undertaken in complete submission to the Scriptures as the inerrant and ultimate source. Moreover, theological retrieval’s overriding concern is to declare and defend the Christian faith on the Bible’s own terms. So retrieval’s application and formulation must be determined by the confession demanded by Scripture. Only then will it matter that contemporary formulation is clear and coherent.

(2) Retrieval should be orthodox. We should defer to orthodoxy unless we find a truly better formulation (i.e., at least equally biblical and more clear and/or coherent). Given the providential efficacy of the Spirit’s illumination during the first centuries of traditioning, a heavy burden of proof lies on those who would change the way we think and speak about subjects where the church has a recognized linguistic-conceptual apparatus. But beyond deference, we should work actively within the categories of orthodoxy to extend them wherever necessary or helpful. This will require us to understand the historical meaning and significance of orthodox formulations so that we can extend and adapt their reasoning and concepts both consistently and biblically.

(3) Retrieval should be careful. Doctrinal formulation uses particular terms to convey certain concepts which attempt to make the best sense of Scripture. However, most terms are capable of communicating a range of concepts, each with various strengths and weaknesses that determine its capacity to serve the church’s declaration and defense of the faith. Moreover,

all formulations rely on presuppositions (explicit and implicit) and have implications beyond their immediate use. Theological retrieval, then, requires uncompromising attention to these details to remain biblical and orthodox and to help (not harm) the church's worship and witness. We should not make uncritical appropriation of concepts or proposals from the past. Rather, we should distinguish between ecclesial and dogmatic authority, recognizing the appropriate measure of deference and determining a tradition's usefulness in contemporary theology based on the nature and strength of its biblical support.

(4) Retrieval should be coordinated. Doctrinal formulation entails doctrinal integration. The early church's struggle with issues at the intersection of Trinity, Christology, anthropology, and soteriology illustrates that no doctrine stands alone; any change in one affects others. Every attempt at retrieval, then, should zoom in to focus on the positive effects for a particular doctrine and zoom out to ensure it does not create any negative effects for other doctrines. This coordination applies to both the original tradition and the new application. Importing a new development back into the original tradition and measuring its doctrinal ripple effects is a good test for the care we have taken in rightly understanding what we retrieved in the first place. And if application in the present causes problems in other areas, this would require careful, orthodox, and ultimately biblical revision.

(5) Retrieval should be creative. By its nature, retrieval entails the application of theology from the past to new issues in the present. And this application involves creative adaptation. The early church's doctrinal achievements were not the terms themselves or the agreement to use them. Rather, the church succeeded where it developed terms and concepts with the capacity to bring out the truth of Scripture into the church's active and intelligent fellowship with God. As it remains biblical, orthodox, careful, and coordinated in its retrieval, the church is freed to be creative in its search for the best formulation of each issue.

(6) Retrieval should be constructive. The purpose of dogmatic retrieval is to correct and/or advance the doctrines by which the truth of Scripture passes into the present consciousness and life of the church. As Kevin Vanhoozer has said, our goal is not to revile the past in "chronological snobbery" or to relive it in "chronological stubbornness." We should embrace the need for each generation to address the issues of its day. And we should recognize

that the best course is not innovation but construction on a firm foundation (Scripture) and within a sound framework (orthodoxy). Such theological retrieval can help the church build when necessary in ways that are truly helpful while remaining content with and committed to its theological house. Life in this house will flourish in faithfulness to Scripture according to the kind of clarity and coherence that equips and encourages the church for the fullness of covenant life under the lordship of Christ.

Such a methodology, I believe, will help the church avoid the peril and achieve the promise of theological retrieval. For that reason, I pray the church will recover and continue its earlier practice of employing the best reasoning from Scripture so that the gift of tradition increases in every generation to the glory of our triune God.

¹ While the Reformers and their heirs rightly disagreed with the Roman view of some central doctrines that would solidify in the *solas*, they agreed with and relied upon a larger theological framework, including Trinitarian and Christological orthodoxy.

² Theological retrieval can touch upon nearly every aspect of the church's life, from interpreting Scripture and formulating doctrine to practicing spiritual disciplines, gathering for worship, and scattering for missions. My comments here are limited to the dogmatic domain.

³ The goal of written revelation is not mere repetition but renewal of the heart and mind. And that renewal comes not through mere meditation on Scripture but ultimately through reasoning from the Scriptures under the direction of the Lord and the didactic potency of the Holy Spirit.

⁴ The imperfection of illumination marks not an insufficiency in the Spirit's ministry but the progressive design of the church's intellectual sanctification.

⁵ The typical taxonomy ranks sources of theology as follows: (1) Scripture; (2) creeds from ecumenical; (3) confessional statements; (4) theological opinions from teachers of the church.

⁶ One of the best resources on this subject, which also provides an excellent demonstration in the context of Christology, is Stephen Wellum's *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ* (Crossway, 2016).

⁷ The following observations are grounded in a study of the primary sources. But I have received much help from Demetrios Bathrellos and his insightful work, *The Byzantine Christ: Person, Nature, and Will in the Christology of Saint Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁸ Also known as John of Caesarea, the Grammarian included in his *Apology for Chalcedon* an explanation of how the Definition's two-nature formula did not result in the Nestorian addition of a second person in Christ. His unsuccessful approach explains why this note is necessary to identify him to most. But this failure and obscurity can only be understood in light of the successful approaches discussed ahead. And this should remind us that retrieval requires an uncompromising attention to the details of a position and its implications.

⁹ Once conflated, these two theologians have now been recognized for their separately significant works by the consensus of scholarship. The Leontioi wrote a number of works in which they expounded on Chalcedonian orthodoxy to argue against remaining and resurgent heresies, including Nestorianism, Apollinarianism, and monophysitism.

¹⁰ The *an-enhypostasis* distinction would find further explicated by John of Damascus (675-749), which provides another illustration of careful, orthodox, biblical retrieval in the early church.

¹¹ In opposition to the divine and human wills of Christ, some groups argued for various conceptions of one will (monothelitism), which was usually the divine will.