Twitter Thread by Logan Stewart



Logan Stewart
@RefScholastic

I've been reflecting some on Anatolios' book and wanted to put some thoughts down about doctrinal development, specifically re the Trinity.

The first thing that we have to say is that all Christians, irrespective of which tradition we are from, have to reckon with doctrinal development. Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, we need to understand that doctrines do historically develop as the church reflects on Scripture.

Crucially, as Protestants, what distinguishes our mode of development from others is that our development absolutely must be regulated by Scripture. We are captives to the word of God. Therefore, as we develop doctrine it is crucial that it is developed biblically.

Both of these things being the case, we need a model of explaining doctrinal development that can account for the fact of development and the fact that it must be truly biblical development. Though Anatolios is a Malkite, I think the model he presents is workable.

By which, I mean that his model, which is original to the French Catholic Gabriel Marcel, explains doctrinal development in ways that 1) account for how development actually occurs historically, and 2) leaves the conclusion of development open to analysis on Scriptural terms.

The model works with two phases of reflection. 1) the church lives it's experience of various doctrinal data points. This is primary reflection in which the church isn't concerned with necessarily fitting these things together or describing how they interact. They just exist.

The illustration Anatolios uses is wearing a watch. You aren't constantly aware of the fact that you have a watch. You aren't trying to reconcile your state of watch wearing with the other facts of your life.

But following primary reflection a break in experience occurs. The data of the church's primary reflections bump up against a significant obstacle that forces the church to reconcile the doctrines in question and thus overcome that tension.

The illustration he uses here is the fact of losing the watch. Once your watch is gone, you become aware of two facts that are in tension and need to be resolved: 1) you were once wearing a watch and 2) now you are not.

This is where the second phase of reflection enters. In secondary reflection the church begins to work out a grammar, a way of speaking and confessing, that allows her to reconcile the points that exist in perceived tension.

With that model in place we can apply it to the Trinity and see why the conceptualities of the Trinity are a biblically necessary development. Remember, the Trinity is a globalizing doctrine, one that develops out of the sum total of Christian experience in worship and revelation

Anatolios helpfully identifies several doctrines that end up in tension which force us to reconcile in the form of the Trinity. 1) the radical distinction between God and the world. 2) the primacy of Jesus Christ as mediator between God and the World.

3) the universally accepted fact of the Sons generation (though this is where the controversy with the Arians will be located). 4) the oneness of God. 5) the distinction of Father, Son, and Spirit contra Sabellius.

Once the church began having to articulate her beliefs and proclamations in a way that is coherent she faced a break in experience wherein all of these elements have to be resolved in secondary reflection.

The church, broadly, had to account for how God could be one, God was radically independent as the principle of all creation, how Father, Son, and Spirit were to be proclaimed in the gospel, the generation of the Son, and how modalism could be avoided.

Ultimately, the church realized that the only way to preserve all of these elements was to distinguish between nature and person. The oneness of God must be oneness of nature. And within this one nature there were three persons.

Thus God is one with respect to nature, three with respect to person. This safeguards divine oneness and transcendence and protects against modalism while ensuring that all three persons could be worshiped and glorified in praise and proclamation.

But the church still had to account for generation of the Son and his primacy over every created thing. How could be truly be son of the Father while also being over all created things? This is the very heart of the Arian debate.

Arius held he was generated in time. The generation of the Son was an act of creation before time or any created thing. To be sure, the Son was divine, but not of the Divine nature of the Father and thus a created thing who then created all else.

We rightly reject this. The Son's generation is eternal and within the Divine nature. There never was a time when he was not. Thus he is truly one with God. Truly distinct from the Father. Truly Generated. Truly prime over all.

From a protestant perspective, all of this shows us why the doctrine of the Trinity is biblical and necessary. Each of the elements which needed reconciliation were really truly present in the structure of Scripture itself.

The Trinity developed, not by reflecting on abstract philosophy, nor by hellenization to make the faith palatable to Greeks. The Trinity arose from the very core truths of Scriptures witness to Christ. And thus the whole Bible is Trinitarian. And the Trinity is deeply biblical.