

A Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundation of Doctrinal Criticism, by Alister E. McGrath. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997. Pp. x + 266.*

One has come to expect significant, original work from this Oxford theologian, and the present work is no exception. Originally delivered in 1990 as the famous Bampton lectures and published in the same year in the U.K., this volume represents a thorough investigation of the development of Christian doctrine and the nature of doctrine itself. What is doctrine? How can a doctrinal statement made in the past have authoritative status for the present? These are important questions that cannot be solved by simple proof-texting or mere recourse to one's own theological tradition. His treatment of the genesis of doctrine and the foundations of doctrinal criticism involves important issues such as the relationship between doctrine and Scripture or the external referents of doctrine.

At the outset McGrath quotes the renowned French thinker Paul Ricoeur, who wrote, "A human being discovers his finitude in the fact that, first of all, he finds himself within a tradition or traditions." However, as another influential hermeneutical theorist, Hans-Georg Gadamer, has pointed out, the inevitability of finding oneself in a particular tradition does not mean that tradition is in and of itself bad -- it simply is and must be subjected to critical scrutiny in order to accomplish the kind of distancing required not to be enslaved by one's tradition. This is especially crucial for those of us who, as believers committed to the final authority of Scripture, hold that even our own traditions must be subordinated to the teachings of Scripture themselves.

What is more, as McGrath reminds us in the present volume, we should not think that we are alone in the struggle to award a proper place to doctrine and tradition. We rather stand in a long tradition of doctrinal formation (what McGrath calls "the genesis of doctrine"), and if we are willing to learn from the lessons of the past, we are not doomed to repeat the mistakes made by our doctrinal forebears. By all means, McGrath contends, we must avoid the two extremes that have too often been the norm in the church--either merely to affirm or ignore our past. Rather, we must, as McGrath calls it, engage in "doctrinal criticism." That is, we need to engage in a disciplined effort "to evaluate the reliability and adequacy of the doctrinal formulations of the Christian tradition, by identifying what they purport to represent, clarifying the pressures and influences which lead to their genesis, and suggesting criteria -- historical and theological -- by which they may be evaluated and, if necessary, restated" (p. vii). McGrath's own starting point for such an endeavor are his investigations of the history of the doctrine of justification within the western Christian tradition and his study of the intellectual origins of the Reformation, as well as George Lindbeck's work entitled *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984).

In McGrath's introduction to the initial chapter, he points out that the history of Jesus of Nazareth is the controlling paradigm, primary external referent, and ultimate explicandum of Christian theology (p. 1). Authority is attributed to the Jesus of history not merely because of past events, but because what happened through Jesus is considered to be significant for the transformation of the present and the construction of the future. The New Testament is therefore "essentially the repository of the formative and identity-giving traditions of the Christian community . . . as they concern Jesus of Nazareth" (p. 1). The observation that Jesus Himself is the fount of all Christian

doctrinal formulation effectively counters the prevailing contemporary prejudice that theology is invariably an exercise in stale and abstract boredom.

Consider, for instance, the exciting distillation of the gospel as received and proclaimed by Paul in 1 Cor. 15:3-5, according to which Jesus was crucified, buried, and raised according to the Scriptures. Significantly, the person (and work) of Jesus quickly became the source of doctrinal conflict in the early church. The development of orthodox Christological formulations took on utmost urgency, if apostolic tradition was to be preserved and defended against imbalanced, or otherwise flawed, theological constructs pertaining to the focal point of Christian doctrine -- Jesus Christ.

This genesis of doctrinal conflict bred certain theological language that drew on available conceptual resources that had currency at the time such formulations were developed. As is often not sufficiently recognized, however, this means that such formulations, helpful and adequate as they might have been at a given point in time, nonetheless are embedded in a particular sociocultural and temporal context that may require period reformulation.

What McGrath calls "the inevitability of doctrine" arises in part from conflict that necessitates more precise doctrinal development, in part from the narrative nature of much of the scriptural material itself, and in part from the time-bound nature of theological language and a given conceptual framework. One of the first such challenges to reconceptualize the Christian faith arose from the early church's movement from Jerusalem to the Graeco-Roman world and the ensuing need to communicate what was at the heart a Jewish phenomenon to a Gentile (Hellenistic) audience. The first centuries of the Christian church, in particular the major councils, provide ample illustration of the "inevitability of doctrine."

After engaging the work of George Lindbeck (see above), McGrath postulates and explores the following four theses: (1) Doctrine functions as a social demarcator; (2) doctrine is generated by, and subsequently interprets, the Christian narrative; (3) doctrine interprets experience; and (4) doctrine makes truth claims. It is not possible here to trace McGrath's line of argument in detail. We can do no better than quote his own summary on p. 63:

Christian doctrine may be regarded as the present outcome of that long growth of tradition in which the Christian community has struggled to arrive at an interpretation of its foundational traditions, embodied in the New Testament, which both does justice to its own present place in OT tradition, and attempts to eliminate those doctrinal pre-judgements which are to be judged as inadequate. This interpretation involves a continuous interaction between scriptural narrative and doctrinal formulations, in an attempt to find an interpretative framework, or range of such frameworks, already hinted at within the New Testament, on the basis of which the narrative of Jesus of Nazareth might be viewed at enhanced levels of meaning (p.63).

I believe that the significance of McGrath's thesis is at least two-fold: first, Christian theology is, or ought to be, by its very nature Christocentric; and second, properly understood, Jesus and the history of Jesus are prior -- even to the scriptural narratives depicting them. Thus it is not merely the nature of Christian Scripture that is of crucial significance; it is also the nature of Christ, including His Incarnation and atonement. The gulf that separates postmodern man from absolute truth and ultimate spiritual reality cannot be bridged merely with reference to the unique, supreme story told

in the Scriptures. It can only be bridged through an appeal to the reality of Christ's Incarnation (as attested by Scripture): the pre-existent, eternal Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1: 14); no one has ever seen God, but the unique God, Jesus Christ, has told His story (ἐξηγήομαι; John 1:18). Thus Christ, logically as well as historically, precedes Scripture, and this must be reflected in both doctrinal formulation and apologetic presentation.

It is not necessary, or possible, here to layout in full McGrath's argumentation in the remaining chapters, aptly titled "On Being Condemned to History: The Authority of the Past in Modern Christian Thought," and "Tradition: Access to the Identity-Giving Past." These significant chapters merely flesh out McGrath's earlier contentions. We may conclude with a brief summary of the author's final recommendations. First and foremost, McGrath warns against setting aside large swaths of the Christian tradition in an effort to placate postmodern sensibilities. He rather recommends a critical evaluation and reappropriation of the doctrinal heritage of the Christian tradition. As McGrath puts it, "An impatience with doctrine . . . appears to reveal a more fundamental impatience with Christianity itself" (p. 198).

Tellingly, he emphasizes the crucial importance of evangelism for the survival and wellbeing of the Christian church, for it is "only through individuals coming to stand within the Christian tradition that they will fully understand its values, aspirations - and its doctrines" (p. 198). As Augustine worded it in his classical formulation, "Unless you believe, you will never understand." The correct strategy, so McGrath, is not accommodation but conversion. To that end apologetics may be employed, combining the merits of "epistemological rigor, cultural realism and social pragmatism" (pp. 199-200).

Finally, as McGrath reminds us, tradition is not merely something that has been "handed down" to us. Rather, it has been "handed over" to us, and we have been given the responsibility, even authority, to appropriate our doctrinal inheritance in turn to pass it on to yet another generation of believers, and thus the cycle is to continue until the Lord returns.

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