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Doctrine and Change in Western Conservative Dogmatics: The Examples of Michael Seewald and Kevin J. Vanhoozer

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Abstract: The Roman Catholic Church and the various Protestant Churches still represent the largest and most visible expressions of institutionalized religion in Western Europe and North America. Yet, both Christian strands find themselves in sorts of peril, for especially in Europe, membership and participation are declining, influence on various dimensions and contexts of society is shrinking, and in some regions, the public associates the churches more with meaninglessness, backwardness, or outright scandal. Whatever the specifics of the churches' statuses, the reasons for these overall trends are complex. One crucial factor is the success (or lack thereof) in the mediation between a change in the cultural climate for one, and the very essence of Christianity for another: so, while some strands of the Christian religion seem to welcome any sort of change, others would rather want to 'go back' to some better days, which are suspected to lay in the past. Typical 'practical' examples, in which these overall trajectories become tangible, could be issues such as abortion, education, or the role of women in the church, however, likewise, positions occur on somewhat more abstract discussions on gender, climate change, or, most recently, the management of the pandemic or positioning of oneself in the context of war.

Keywords: religion; doctrine; dogma; Vanhoozer; Seewald; developing doctrine; Western; dogmatics; Roman Catholicism; conservative theology; Evangelicalism; gospel; future of theology; change; ecumenism

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1. Introduction

A central feature of the Christian religion—one that is essential in negotiating between continuity and discontinuity in any given particular discussion—is the given Christian tradition. This may not seem to be the case for many areas within various expressions of the Christian religion but it seems to be the case that dogmatics still play a crucial role in most of these Christian expressions for one and that dogmatics are a rather conservative force in many of these expressions for another. Hence, no matter how one refers to this tradition—be it as creeds or confessions, doctrine, or Scripture there are some given concepts in each expression of Christianity which exercise authority over how one should think, believe, and act. While such traditions are often—and, I believe, rightly so—perceived as resources, they also *reduce* the capacity for change: Christians are not free to pursue whatever they personally deem best at any given point in time—they are, in a sense, bound by tradition. This has become especially evident in Roman Catholicism as well as major sections of Evangelicalism, which in turn become forces that tend to be seen as—and eventually are—forces *against* many sorts of change. This is not to say that these forms of Christianity have been and are not also sources for change—there are, after all, many "positive" examples in history that attest to this. However, there may also be examples in which forms of Christianity lacked (and may do so today) the capacity for "good change"—changes that are necessary not because of popular demand (alone) but because they address any given shortcoming of Christianity measured by its own criteria.

Our concern here is with Western conservative doctrine: Doctrine, for one, is approached here as a determining feature of Western Christianity, broadly referring to the

content a given strand of that form of Christianity advocates. Yet, it is a particularly *conservative* doctrine, for another, which brings about the challenge of continuity and development. Now, 'conservative theology' (just as 'liberal theology', for that matter) seems to be another 'container term' (*Containerbegriff*)—a term that includes many attributes that are associated with it (Weiß 2017, p. 13). We will not dive into the discussion necessary for defining conservative theology properly, as for the course of this essay it suffices to highlight that the overall aim of conservative theology seems to *conserve* a certain theology, while liberal theology may tend to adjust to—or 'go with'—modernity (see, for instance, Lauster (2019, p. 1)). Conservative theology, on the other hand, tends to perceive this as a problem and seeks to cling to traditional theology (Olson 2013). Where conservative theology defines itself, usually by referring to concepts such as Scripture or orthodoxy, liberal theology tends to refer to subjective experience and the importance of being free from external demands such as dogmata (von Stosch 2019, p. 230). Hence, it is a conservative doctrine where the quest for the potential for change becomes imminent, just because those *cannot* adapt to other demands easily—no matter whether these demands stem from secular, individual, political, ecumenical, or other origins. Typical candidates for such Western conservative theology, at least in the overall perception, are Roman Catholicism, and—especially US-American—Evangelicalism.

This paper argues that (a) on the broad level, there is some ambiguity in Western conservative dogmatics on how much change and development is conceptually possible. This paper hence explores the potential for change within trends of Christianity related to conservative doctrine, arguing (b) that the authority of doctrine is not as static as often perceived, even *from within* those strands of conservative strands of the Christian religion but that such explorations must consider the traditions of the various strands of religion. For making this case, this paper (1) argues that both dogma and doctrine refer to somewhat *binding beliefs*, representing, hence, forces that ensure continuity in Western conservative dogmatics; forces that can be assessed only with regard to the faith traditions they stem from. By way of example for exploring the possibilities for change within faith traditions, this paper then (2) summarizes some perspectives on those concepts, as well as the potential for change, in the recent works of two Western conservative theologians (i.e., the work of the German Roman Catholic theologian Michael Seewald and the US-American Evangelical theologian Kevin J. Vanhoozer). With its broad scope in Section 2 and the exemplifications in Section 3, this paper tests out both some options and ways toward a book-length treatment of this issue of doctrine and change.

2. Continuity via Doctrine

Working on continuity and change in Christian doctrine 50 years ago, Jaroslav Pelikan noted that "the fact of change somehow belongs to the very definition of Christian truth" (Pelikan 2014). So, to get a hold on the force that brings about continuity via doctrine, we may start with a rather foundational question: what *is* doctrine? For reasons that will become more transparent during this essay, we are not asking, as some (Lindbeck 1984), for the nature of doctrine but rather how doctrine is usually construed in Western dogmatics. Now, with regard to the everyday usage of the term, Merriam-Webster defines doctrine as "a principle or position or the body of principles in a branch of knowledge or system of belief". The concept of doctrine can occur, for instance, in fundamental government policy (e.g., the Truman Doctrine), as well as in religion (e.g., the doctrine of election). In a more "archaic" sense, doctrine would be "something that is being taught". Whether it is a body of principles, a system of belief, or a foundation for policy of or faith being taught, doctrine seems to be rather continuous, even static, and this begs the question of whether doctrine brings about the potential for (good) change.

We will continue with a brief analysis of the overall understanding of doctrine by surveying doctrine's most "static" concept—the concept of dogma—before we turn to the question of the capacity for change in Western conservative doctrine. I will argue that both paths represent significant forces of continuity and conclude that to explore the actual

validity of such forces they must be assessed considering each given faith tradition in much more detail; a task that I will exemplify in some ways in Section 2.

2.1. Dogma as Binding Beliefs

When it comes to forms and sources of Christian teaching in combination with the issues of change, the most contested concept probably is the concept of dogma. Used in everyday language, Merriam-Webster defines dogma as "something held as an established opinion", especially "a definite authoritative tenet". Critically, the concept can refer to "a point of view or tenet put forth as authoritative without adequate grounds". In a religious context, dogma can be "a doctrine or body of doctrines concerning faith or morals formally stated and authoritatively proclaimed by a church."

In Western theology, "dogma" is associated with Roman Catholicism. Here, Filser characterizes dogma as a proposition of the Christian faith that comes from the church, is assumed to be true, and is mandatory (Marschler and Schärtl 2014, p. 48). For Müller, "dogma" can be distinguished from the rule of faith or confession of faith not in principle but only via a more distinguished terminological expression of the content of faith (Müller 2016, p. 79). He emphasizes the definition of Vatican I, according to which only three dogmata exist. However, other explications of the church may also represent dogmata, given that not the term but the binding character (*Verbindlichkeit*) of the claim would be crucial. Such conceptualizations can be found in popular catechisms as well: dogma is not an addition for the genuine gospel—and even less a new form of revelation—but an official exposition, binding for the entire church, of the revelation that has been revealed once and for all; mostly rejecting other, confusing or . . . dangerous expositions of the gospel (Erwachsenen-Katechismus 1985, p. 56). So, right at the beginning, we may distinguish the application of "dogma" in the technical and the broader sense. For us, the broader sense of the meaning is relevant, according to which dogma represents binding beliefs.

In Protestant theology, dogma can be understood both as an opinion or as a judgment, while the NT would use the term more in the second sense (Härle 2018, pp. 147–48). In modern theology, dogma refers to binding ecclesiastic teaching, and Becker characterizes dogma as an official doctrine or teaching that has been formally defined at an ecumenical council in order to set forth the orthodox understanding of whatever is presented in the dogma (Becker 2015, p. 498). The historical background, e.g., the usage in ancient philosophies or the role of Vincent of Lérins, is rather present (Danz 2016, p. 16). Overall, the term "dogma" is understood to be referring to a central doctrine of the Christian faith, which has (a) been officially recognized and is now (b) an understood normative for a right understanding and confession of the Christian faith. Hence, the triune nature of God and the union of divine and human natures in the one person of Jesus Christ are chief examples of "dogma" (Migliore 2014, p. 448); alternatively, the entire seven ecumenical councils are seen as definitive instances of dogma (Becker 2015, p. 498).

One could discuss the differentiation between dogma, creeds, and confessions. However, these differentiations seem to be of quite secondary importance in the light of the overall critique Protestantism has of any concept of anything of authority next to the Bible. Criticism of the concept of dogma is hence close to the Protestant mind: Härle, for instance, critically engages the Vatican I definition, which treats dogma and divine revelation on the same level, and hence requires the anathema for those disregarding the dogmata of the Roman Catholic Church. For Protestantism, dogma would have to be distinguished from divine revelation, subdued to it, and to be measured by it critically. In this sense, Protestantism could accept the concept of dogma, given that the claim of validity would take into account the recognized truth (Härle 2018, pp. 147–48). So, while Roman Catholic theologians stress that dogmata are truths revealed through divine revelation and authoritatively taught by the church's magisterial, Protestant theologians tend to hold that all dogmatic formulations in the church's tradition are in principle open to revision (Becker 2015, p. 498). Furthermore, as it has only been in the modern period that there is a Roman

Catholic understanding of dogma which would be understood as mandatory teaching, dogma could not be accepted within Protestantism (Danz 2016, p. 16).

In sum, Protestant theology understands doctrinal formulation per se—and this would include dogma—as reformable. In Roman Catholic theology, however, dogmata are said to be "truths contained in divine revelation, articulated by ecumenical councils, and authoritatively interpreted by the church's magisterium", indicating the continuing bindingness of dogma (Migliore 2014, p. 448). Hence, it could seem that Roman Catholicism's dogma represents a particular form of binding beliefs, and Protestantism takes issue with such a concept. However, we may easily realize that this rather popular picture is much more complicated.

2.2. Doctrine as Binding Beliefs?

Given that doctrine can be understood simply as "that which is taught" (Becker 2015, p. 498), and that Protestantism claims to reject the impossibility of revision of a particular form of teaching (i.e., dogma), it seems reasonable for many to somehow conclude that doctrine in both Roman Catholic and Protestant thought are less definitive than dogma. However, this is hardly the case in both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. In Roman Catholicism, there are a substantial number of teachings that formally do not represent dogma. My concern here is, however, more on the Protestant side: how do conservative Protestant theologies construe the difference between doctrine and dogma?

While there is a consensus that the term dogma refers to certain, more binding beliefs, the term 'doctrine' does not refer to a particular or binding teaching (Webster et al. 2007, p. 1). However, there are accounts of Protestant theology that indicate a more binding understanding, at least of their doctrines. This becomes evident maybe the most in strands of US-American Evangelicalism. Wayne Grudem, for instance, defines doctrine as "what the whole Bible teaches us today about some particular topic" (Grudem 2020, p. 25). Given that doctrine is construed here as a rather simple systematization of the text of the Bible, doctrine might appear to some as something that is as authoritative as Scripture itself. Of course, Grudem does not *say* that doctrine has the same authority as Scripture has (and eventually does not even mean that) but this is the obvious conclusion the reader may draw. Similarly, *Biblical Doctrine* argues that doctrine should be understood in the broad meaning of teaching but that there is "sound" and "false" doctrine (MacArthur and Mayhue 2017, pp. 40–41), leaving the reader with the choice of either accepting the following—roughly thousand pages of—presentations of doctrine, or standing somewhat at odds with sound doctrine. While of course, US-American Evangelical theologies differ significantly in tone and agenda, overall there tends to be a certain ambiguity regarding the differentiation between dogma and doctrine; sometimes in surprising places (cf. Frame 2013; Horton 2013).

At the same time, it is way too easy to follow a common reflex of dismissing such contributions—for in being straight-forward, and with their somewhat unapologetic style, they own up to a challenge that is inherent in *all* forms of conservative Christian theology given that at some point all these theologies must either define or include one more definitive element(s) of doctrine. As Wolfgang Härle argues, it is fully appropriate for the Christian faith that its contents are presented in form of propositions, that is, as teaching (Härle 2018, pp. 12–14). Yet, what is this continuing content of the Christian faith that is being taught? Does it suffice to cling to the Apostles' Creed? Does one have to buy into modern Protestant doctrines? Again, such questions only arise in conservative accounts of theology, and answering them is next to impossible for several reasons. By means of narrowing things down, however, conservative theologians might agree with Pannenberg, who describes the gospel as God acting in the person of Jesus of Nazareth (Pannenberg 1988, p. 25). While there would be the need for much more exposition of such a provisional summary, the point here is only that these acts of God in Christ would be the content of the dogmata and creeds of the Scriptures, any given Christian, Christian church, or Christendom.

It seems, overall, that conservative Protestantism spends significant effort on *what* it teaches, also on *how* it comes to that teaching (the question of method) but much less so on what doctrine effectively *means*: this question is often neglected in Protestant accounts of theology. We can illustrate the problem with regard to the individual, the ecclesial, and the academic dimension: Regarding the individual dimension, we could imagine a spectrum between two extremes, for instance, the notion that doctrine is a suggestion without further sanction at all on the one hand, and that all doctrines must be believed to be "saved" on the other. In the ecclesiastic dimension, we could imagine a spectrum of two extremes as well, for instance, between the notion that doctrine can be revised considering the current needs on the one hand, and that one must believe those doctrines to be part of that community. Regarding the scholarly dimension, we could imagine a spectrum of two extremes as well, for instance, one in which historical doctrine is fully up for revision on the one hand, and that historical doctrines must be maintained at all costs. All three dimensions are relevant. Yet the most fundamental seems to be the scholarly one. This is the one we will focus on in the following.

2.3. Conclusions

So far, we have been making the case that the popular charges against Roman Catholic dogma might easily disguise the problem that both centers and borders any account of Christian doctrine, and the conservative Protestant side faces similar problems. In both Roman Catholicism and in Protestantism this problem belongs in the same conceptual space, namely the discipline of dogmatics. This less fortunate term[1] can be characterized in Roman Catholicism as the methodological presentation of the reality of the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ, expressed in ecclesiastic confession, including dogma. Yet, as Müller clarifies, while dogmatics as a discipline since the 18th century is referring to some distinct dogmata, it is not reduced to such formal dogmata anymore. Hence, dogma here refers to the "whole of Christian faith in confession and praxis of the church" (Müller 2016, p. 36). Somewhat similar in Protestant theology, dogmatics is seen as something that *conceptualizes and critiques the Christian faith as a whole*.[2]

Yet, this is where unity ends: none of the content, method, or style of dogmatics can be easily compared with another—in fact, this seems to be impossible at times even in the Protestant strand alone. This is, then, true for the essence of doctrine as well. Higton, for instance, asserts that even with a narrow focus on formal doctrinal pronouncements, it would not be clear that there is such a thing as a nature of doctrine: "a single, unified account of what doctrinal statements are for, of how they work, and of what they achieve" (Higton 2020, p. 12). In the following section, we will hence summarize two examples for introspective analyses, both asking for the possibility of change within the doctrine of their own faith traditions, which are prototypes of Western Protestant doctrine: Roman Catholicism and US-American Evangelicalism.

3. Change in Doctrine

One of the aspects that somewhat unites the following two cases includes the fact that they do pursue no ecumenically motivated agendas for one. Furthermore, they do not impose truth claims from the outside on those church traditions but come from some theologically and ecclesiastically acknowledged sources. They are, after all, attempts *from* the within *for* the within.

3.1. Is There Room for Change in Roman Catholicism? Seewald on Dogma and Change

Seewald's book *Dogma im Wandel* (Seewald 2018, p. 54)—dogma in the process of change—has been translated into Spanish (Seewald and Perona 2020) and will be available soon in French (Seewald 2022). An English translation, currently in the works with Cambridge University Press, will be available in one or two years. Given the importance of this contribution to our concern, I will try to summarize the gist of Seewald's contribution briefly.

To protect the gospel from museumization and proclaim it contemporarily as "good news" is the task of the church, which understands itself as a tool of the Holy Spirit (Seewald 2018, p. 15). An indispensable aim for the intellectually responsible fulfillment of the task is dogma. For an initial definition of dogma, Seewald understands one teaching or the teachings of the church, which it proclaims in either case with the assumption that it is true. The dogma relates to the gospel by capturing it in propositional terms somewhat more precisely. The gospel is not a historical entity but a present power, which time and again is present in the confession and witness of the church, yet never is fully emersed within this confession. This way, dogma is a means to an end, not a goal. As such, it must continuously be questioned whether it fulfills its purpose, the propositional presentation of the gospel. Challenges to the dogma come from two sides: religious and secular discourse (Seewald 2018, p. 18). In this, Seewald closes in on two essential questions that dogma must face: (1) Is the Christian claim of truth, which dogmata formulate, legitimate? (2) Does dogma express the gospel in an adequate way? While Seewald admits that the two questions cannot be easily distinguished, it is only the second question he is addressing.

To pursue this second question, Seewald starts out with an elaboration on both of the terms, dogma and development. He does so by advocating an approach that takes the historical development of the term into focus. Regarding dogma, he sets out with the five occurrences the term has in the NT (Lk 2:1, Acts 17:7, Eph 2:15, Col 2:14, and Acts 16:4). He emphasizes that it was this final occurrence which was understood as the mother of doctrine (Seewald 2018, p. 26), i.e., the decisions of an (apostolic) council. In the following, Seewald walks through the developments of what such decisions *mean*. A crucial—and somewhat definitive—moment, of course, is Vatican II, which in effect defines dogma by stating that everything that is to be believed is solemnly decided and proclaimed by the church, as revealed faith by God (Seewald 2018, p. 42); however, Seewald submits, there is more to the current term of dogma, and refers, for instance, to John Paul II and his characterization of dogma. In debating some aspects, such as the capacity for submitting dogmata in the realm of faith and praxis, the question arises whether dogmata can only be offered with respect to what is considered to be revealed in the first place, or whether there is more than one "type" of dogma (Seewald 2018, p. 46), and he concludes that even in most recent history there is the development and ongoing negotiation of what dogma really implies. Hence: "The logic of the magisterium is rigid, but offers those who know its finesse room to think in terms of development" (Seewald 2018, p. 51).

Development, then, can be thought of initially as the unstable synchrony of continuity and discontinuity (Seewald 2018, p. 52). What would have to be taken into account within this dynamic is both human and also God's activity (Seewald 2018, p. 54). Seewald concludes that if a doctrine develops, there is newness on the outside but one that comes with the claim to preserve more continuity than would be guaranteed without it, referring to St. Augustine and his claim that the *homoousios* would have achieved just that (Seewald 2018, p. 54). He comes back to the question: could—or should—there not be a theological theory of development that understands the development of doctrine, not only as the sequence of a programmed process but as historical events in which human beings are actively involved in trying to faithfully appropriate the gospel and to express it meaningfully? (Seewald 2018, p. 73).

To follow up on such questions, in the following chapters Seewald refers to the Bible and then to the epochs of the church until today. He concludes that the Catholic tradition contains a treasure of theories on dogmatic development, which would currently doze along unused (Seewald 2018, p. 270). Given that Catholic doctrine would face pressure to change in dimensions without precedence, he calls for the unfolding of such theories of doctrinal development. One could start with recognizing the various meanings of the very term dogma: In the widest sense (1), dogma can be understood as the whole of Christian teaching, or as explicitly (2) Catholic teaching. Furthermore, the Christological dogma can be understood as (3) a "thematic principle of order" (*thematisches Gliederungsprinzip*). However, with Vatican II, dogma in an ever-narrower sense can be referred to as (4) that

what is contained in the written or traditioned Word of God and is being revealed by God proposed for faith. In terms of (5) individual dogmata, only those cases that have been proclaimed by extraordinary, solemn teaching of the magisterium count.

Furthermore, Seewald suggests eleven distinctions within a typology of theories on the development of dogma, and they are likewise worthy of being surveyed here. The first type, it seems, is the most fundamental one, as it points out that any given theory of development in dogma acknowledges a legitimate moment in such development. Seewald hence coins this the 'legitimatory type'. In the following (Seewald 2018, pp. 276–80), Seewald proposes ten types as a harvest of his study, which seem to be subtypes within (or outside) of such an encompassing first type, and they seem to work in pairs: (A) There is a doctrinal type (2), which focuses on the aspect of teaching (especially since the 19th century), and—somewhat alternatively—an affective type (3), which distinguishes—with Hugo St. Viktor, for instance—between *substantia fidei* und *materia fidei*, between explicit dogmata that could change in some way, and the substance of faith (Hebrews 11:1), which could not. (B) Furthermore, there is a defensive type (4), which fundamentally aims to reject heresy, and an explorative type (5), which, as doctrine also requires further elaboration at certain points in history, would provide further unfolding. (C) Yet, on a different account, there would be a deposital type (6) and an actual type (7): with (7), we may emphasize the *depositum fidei*—a stable content—that is entrusted to the Church once and for all but which is always not entirely conscious to the Church in all aspects. Somewhat different from that, with (8), one could hold that revelation occurs continually *anew* in the realm of the church, which is why the development of doctrine cannot reach back to a concluded, positive deposit (Ratzinger). (D) In another sense, one could contrast a contextual rule-based type (8) with an objective rule-based theory (9): (8) brings about a general skepticism towards objectively fixed criteria that allows for precise definition, of which renewal is legitimate and which represents heretical corruption of doctrine. Type (9), on the other hand, acknowledges theories that attempt to provide "tests" by which the legitimacy of a given development can be identified (e.g., the first edition of Newman's essay on doctrinal development, Vincent of Lérins, and others). (E) Finally, Seewald distinguishes a cognitive type (10), i.e., one that sees doctrinal development as a process that is subject to rational evaluation and discussion. On the other hand, there would be an authoritative type (11), in which the magisterium is understood as acting in support of divine intermission, rending dogma as a product of the supernatural intervention.

Based on this plurality of approaches, Seewald offers three issues as a foundation for further debate on a contemporary theory for the development of dogma: (1) Dogmata fulfill a serving function, they are means to (another) end. Roman Catholicism may distinguish between revelation and dogma, word of God and dogma, and gospel and dogma. The dogma is always an attempt to flesh out something more, the depositum fidei (Seewald 2018, p. 281). (2) The problem of the development of dogma addresses the unstable simultaneousness of continuity and discontinuity. A way forward here can be to reflect on *Christopraxis*—what holds the church together. Where the church requires dogma to be sure, it is more than the sum of those propositions. (3) Objective rule-based attempts seem attractive but have often failed. There is no "mechanical" approach to developing doctrine, Seewald asserts, as phenomena such as faith and hope—to name a few—escape such attempts.

3.2. How May Doctrine Change in Evangelicalism? Vanhoozer on Doctrine and Development

Seewald has pointed out a promising way forward to explore the options of change in Roman Catholic dogma. Another conservative strand of Christianity is US-American Evangelicalism, to which we turn now as a second example. US-American Evangelicalism might well be more pluralistic than Roman Catholicism, a reality expressed in a variety of churches, theological approaches, the absence of one magisterium, etc. Others, as in the case of Seewald and referring to Vanhoozer, must include a much wider body of the literature, as Vanhoozer has addressed the issue of developing doctrine over decades.

It seems to be rather easy to miss that in a way, the pursuit of developing doctrine according 'to the Bible' has always been Vanhoozer's mission. Even in his major works to date, facets of this mission are clearly stated. Vanhoozer begins his first major volume with the acknowledgment that initially he had set out to clarify the role of Scripture in theology, and what it means to "be biblical" (Vanhoozer 2009b, p. 9). Hermeneutics can be seen as a necessary requirement to accomplish a goal within the reader—*being* biblical is more than *thinking* biblical—as many others would in effect have it (Vanhoozer 2009b, p. 455). In his second major work, *The Drama of Doctrine* (Vanhoozer 2005b), the drama of doctrine refers to what God has already said and done, to what the church attempts to understand, and to what the church attempts to participate within in a manner "fittingly" (Vanhoozer 2014, p. 27). Echoing Vanhoozer's first major work, 'being biblical' is the aim, and doctrinal development emerges as a primary agenda of theology. Finally, in *Remythologizing Theology*, Vanhoozer has set himself the task to explore the ontology of God, "whose speech and acts propel the theodrama forward". While the work addresses God, his communication, and his interaction with the world, Vanhoozer describes the work as "an essay in aid of the development of the doctrine of God" (Vanhoozer 2010, from the preface). Next to these 'major three', there are three more works that close in more on the issue of developing doctrine in an Evangelical context. In *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture* (Vanhoozer and Treier 2015), the authors propose a fresh theological account, unfolding the agenda by explicating the material and formal principles of theology (part one), and applying it to a number of contexts (part two). Given its foundational nature, part one has particular importance; and it is here that Vanhoozer conceptualizes his path from God and the gospel (chapter one) to disciples and their doctrine (chapter two). The aim of biblical being is present here as the agenda of pushing doctrinal development as the core of the theologian's bread and butter. The same is true for *Biblical Authority after Babel* (Vanhoozer 2016a), where Vanhoozer pursues this goal and agenda from a less theoretical-abstract approach but more as an attempt to recalibrate the understanding of (Evangelical) churches in the light of a more (original) Protestant perspective. There are further volumes that clearly relate to this aim and agenda (Vanhoozer and Strachan 2015; Vanhoozer 2002, 2005a, 2014, 2016c, 2019). However, there are several essays that tackle the issue more head-on (Vanhoozer 2000, 2004, 2009a, 2013, 2015, 2016b, 2017). It is from these sources that we draw the following sketch of how Vanhoozer, overall, would have doctrine being developed in a context of (probably not only US-American) Evangelicalism.

For Vanhoozer, the quest for doctrine arises within his bigger framework characterized as a drama: the church responding to the good news of the gospel (Vanhoozer 2009a, p. 155). Drama, then, is a key aspect of Vanhoozer's theology: With this, Vanhoozer aims to conceptualize theology as a whole, which brings together God, Scripture, and discipleship. His overall agenda seeks to explicate the implications of the God of the gospel for the Church so that it will grow into the full stature of Christ (Vanhoozer and Treier 2015, chapters one and two). Hence, in a sense, drama is the setup we find ourselves in, and in which we—as others—must act. So, by going beyond Plato's concept of time as a moving image of eternity, one can argue that God is in time a "moving image" of the way God himself is in eternity; the economic Trinity (e.g., what the Father, Son, and Spirit do in history) is a "dramatic representation of what God's eternal life is (the immanent Trinity) and of his eternal gracious disposition toward the world" (Vanhoozer and Treier 2015, p. 65). What God is and does is captured, then, in the Bible, which is why the essence of the Bible—the gospel—is theodramatic (i.e., reporting on the matter of what God (theos) has said and done (drao) in history, for at "the heart of Christianity is not merely an idea of God but rather God's self-communicating words and acts" (Vanhoozer 2014, p. 20). History is hence always theodramatic, representing a "series of divine entrances and exits, especially, as these pertain to what God has done in Jesus Christ" (Vanhoozer 2005b, p. 31).

What God is and what God does is captured in the Bible: a book like any other on the one hand but from a faith perspective, a text authored ultimately by God with Christ as its ultimate content and with the Holy Spirit as its ultimate interpreter (Vanhoozer and

Treier 2015, p. 73). For Christians and the church, the Bible is Scripture but hence also is a script, for it demands to be played out (Vanhoozer 2005b, p. 115): humans (and, in particular, Christians) are called to participate within the drama, not to be hearers alone but doers of the word. How to perform Scripture is not that easy: we find ourselves in ever new situations, and disciples must learn to discern how to do the word in a way that fits the gospel, that is, not only thinking but eventually being biblical (Vanhoozer 2009b, final chapter).

Doctrine is the means that fosters spiritual growth. The theologian's (i.e., the dramaturge's) task can be construed not simply but prominently as supporting the church's pastors in unfolding the script (i.e., Scripture) towards a fitting performance of the church. To Vanhoozer, doctrine "is the reward that faith finds at the end of its search for the meaning of the apostolic testimony to what God was doing in the event of Jesus Christ" (Vanhoozer 2005b, p. 4). It may at times not equal truth in every sense—and may also be seen differently than Scripture in this regard—but it refers to what the church, based on the Bible, believes, teaches, and confesses. Doctrine, hence, is explicated in creeds and statements of faith but also in the churches' most characteristic practices (Higton and Fodor 2015, p. 756). 'Praxis' should be emphasized here: for doctrine can be understood as "direction for the fitting participation of individual and communities in the drama of redemption" (Vanhoozer 2005b, p. 102). As such, it functions as a special kind of instruction that "teaches the head, orients the heart and guides the hand" (Vanhoozer and Treier 2015, p. 107). As not everything in Christian faith functions this way, the nature (the what) and the task (the why) are closely connected in this approach. Structurally, then, the doctrine is necessarily developed and taught on all levels and in all types of churches (Carson 2016). The immensely more difficult question in play, however, is *how* one may develop doctrine, or how to do so *well*.

How to develop doctrine according to Scripture is not easy to be explicated. If (for the sake of limiting this passage and at the risk of oversimplification) we think of *stages* in the development of doctrine, for instance: (1) the setting of the 'construction side', (2) the construction of doctrine, and (3) the assessment of constructions in place. In stage (1) Evangelicals—as Vanhoozer recognizes—must accept the Bible as Scripture (i.e., as ultimate authority) and then follow its lead (in Vanhoozer's phrase, "follow the way the (biblical) words go"). Stage (2)—the actual development—is probably the most difficult stage. For Vanhoozer, it requires imitation, imagination, and improvisation. Imitation is required, since doctrine must cohere with Christ's mind (Philippians 2:5), and in this sense, the "reach of the apostolic discourse" can—and often must—be continued within the pattern of that very mind (Carson 2016, p. 780). Imagination is required, as the "mind of Christ" cannot function as a concrete criterium but rather as a framework of understanding. With C.S. Lewis, imagination can be understood as the "organ of meaning". Hence, it is via imagination that the church reads Scripture, seeing beyond the words, and what is in Christ (Vanhoozer 2016b, p. 781; Vanhoozer and Treier 2015, p. 105). Responding to what is seen both in Scripture and in each context requires a response, and hence improvisation, not by producing innovation but rather by progressively discovering "the full meaning potential of the divine authorial discourse intrinsic to and implicit in the Bible" (Carson 2016, p. 784). In stage (3), one could assess whether some given doctrine expresses canonical sense (e.g., does a development express genuine continuity of the gospel?), Catholic sensibility (e.g., does a development represent continuity with the whole of the church and its tradition?), and contextual sensitivity (e.g., does a development fit into a particular context to enlighten the understanding of God's kingdom?), as expressed in various sources from Vanhoozer (e.g., Vanhoozer 2016b, pp. 788–90).

To be sure, Vanhoozer never offers deliberations on developing doctrine in a brief sketch like this. Yet, this sketch does offer an indication of what directions and emphases one influential approach of looking into the opportunities and prospects of developing doctrine in Western conservative theology might take.

It is important to note that Vanhoozer's dramatic conception of theology is not concerned—at least not ultimately—with suggesting a *new* conception of theology. In

other words, while Vanhoozer is highly original in many regards, he does not seem to seek the conception of a distinctive "Vanhoozerian" conception of theology *at the cost of representing something thoroughly 'Evangelical'*. Much rather, his conception brings together genuine Evangelical features, and his work is highly regarded by very different Evangelicals across that (quite wide) spectrum. In fact, Vanhoozer eventually echoes Paul's self-characterization: "If anyone thinks he has reason for confidence in this label ("evangelical"), I have more . . . " (Vanhoozer and Treier 2015, p. 9). Referring to his own zeal, faith, and righteousness, however, is possible only because Vanhoozer indeed considers specific Evangelical concerns; concerns which are very much his own.

3.3. Conclusions

These two surveys by no means do justice to the careful interaction with their sources. However, it becomes evident that despite their differences, both Seewald and Vanhoozer not only offer fruitful interaction with their traditions by showing that development is possible—and to some good degree, how—but also show some striking similarities in their fundamental approaches. For example, they treat the terms of dogma and doctrine in a way that makes their usage overall interchangeable, and for both, the question about binding certain elements for their change is assessed and construed. For both, dogma/doctrine must be a presentation of the gospel, which comes with more shared concerns (for instance, the issue of sameness regarding the substance and change on the outside of dogma/doctrine). Hence, dogma/doctrine is seen as a means to an end. On the other hand, these reflections are different from each other in many ways: so to illuminate the potentials and means for "good change" within their own strands of the Christian faith, Seewald focuses more closely on the deposit of Roman Catholic teaching, while for Vanhoozer this means to conceptualize more broadly the deposit of Scripture itself.

4. Outlook

Is there room for a doctrine to change? Is there room for development in dogma? If so, how can it be done? Change is not just required by public demand but it might be required by the very essence of a given conservative faith tradition. Presenting the content of the gospel in ever-new situations has been key in the history of Christianity, as it will be in the 21st century and beyond. Seewald and Vanhoozer show compelling ways how this change could be brought about in a healthy way. This way, however, has not been traveled; in fact, it has not been illuminated enough. Hence, there is a call for theologians to pursue both path-finding and path-walking. Both will require much more work—I hope to continue with a book-length treatment in due time—and hope also that other experts in their fields might be interested to follow up on the examples set by Seewald and Vanhoozer It is a timely enterprise, I believe, and although it might seem to be impossible at times, it might yet be quite possible to accomplish. For, with Seewald, it is true that the demands of a given conservative faith tradition are rigid, and yet it does offer room to think in terms of good change to those who know its finesse.

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Notes

[1] Some have suggested it might be better to refer to 'doctrinal theology' rather than to 'dogmatic theology' or 'dogmatics' as the discipline that focuses on the big theological ideas that do turn up in creeds and confessions (Higton 2020, p. 13). While I agree, 'dogmatics' is the term typically assigned to the field we locate our quest for change in doctrine, and hence we will go with it.

[2] For Barth, for instance, "Dogmatics it the scholarly enterprise (Wissenschaft), in which the church—given the available measure of insight—justifies about the content of its proclamation, i.e., given its measurement of holy Scripture and according to the instruction of its confessions" (Barth 1948).

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