

SCIENCE AND RELIGION  
GRADED PAPER 2  
DOUG GEBHARDT

## The thesis and arguments

Your thesis is stated with reasonable clarity, but it is a weak one. It is reasonable and useful to observe that previously invalid doctrines were the result of context-free, mono-semantic interpretations of scriptural verses. However, you then fail to address any of the difficult questions that follow from that observation. How much context is enough? Why was an extra-religious, extra-theological approach necessary to reveal the contextual errors? What if the new interpretations agree with scientific observation, but have a weaker theological grounding?

Ultimately, you presented a few anecdotal examples, but none that were persuasive. Some of your examples required not only more indirect and implausible interpretations, but also required ignoring verses that seemed to conflict with the new interpretation. You never address whether scripture loses its meaning or potency when its interpretation is increasingly informed by outside influences (most of all, science).

## The writing

Your paper is riddled with passive constructions, making your claims seem weak and uncertain. Be direct and active in asserting your claims and observations. You exacerbate this problem with extra verbiage that carries little meaning. You seem, to a certain degree, to be writing to impress, rather than writing to be clear and convincing.

## Items marked on the paper

(1) First, as you may have noticed, there's far too much passive construction here. Be direct and clear.

Regarding the content, you're haphazardly mixing a number of ideas here. Does invalidating doctrine invalidate the faith? How should one ascertain the truth? Under what circumstances can a religion adapt? These are substantial questions, but you're presenting them without any structure, without clear relationships, and without sufficient context.

(2) The use of *simple* here reveals a problem with your thesis. If the misunderstanding was so simple, then why was an external system (science) required to correct it? Could religion have corrected it without such external help? Moreover, the problem is not merely disagreement between old doctrine and scientific observation, but the **vehemence** with which the doctrine is defended. Your thesis ignores the stubborn opposition that precedes the updating of doctrine, and it is that opposition that keeps the misunderstanding from being *simple*.

(3) Where is the evidence—the quotes and citations—to support this claim? Just how did the church (I’m assuming what we now call the Catholic Church) lose power, followers, and validity? What does it mean to *lose validity*, and to whom or in what specific manner did the church lose it? You cannot make claims like this one without support; otherwise, it seems just convenient conjecture.

(4) The question you raise—how such disparate beliefs came to exist—is not the only nor the most obvious question that would follow from your previous statements. The reader now has no motivation. **Why** should the reader care about the origin of these conflicting ideas? You’ve provided neither motivation nor an intended path by which you plan to examine this question, thus leaving the reader disoriented.

(5) A skeptic could argue persuasively that it is a stretch to equate the “four corners” with the four directions on a compass. This argument would be interpreted by some as excuse-making for scripture written at a time and within a culture that had a poor model of the Earth’s structure. That we have two-dimensional navigation system that yields four directions is meaningless coincidence.

(6) A contrary view—one that you fail to address—is that the Bible is so extensive that it can, by careful selection of verses, be made to support nearly **any** assertion. Claiming that science merely refines scriptural interpretation is, by this skeptical view, to ignore that the new interpretations now become meaningless. You must, as an author, anticipate and address this type of objection.

(7) So what is the context for this quote? How do I know that you are not also using a quote out of context to support a conclusion that you hope to reach? Isn’t this exactly how demonstrably incorrect doctrines were created?

**Grade:** C+

Doug Gebhardt

Possible Explanations for the Changing of Church Doctrines

As <sup>we</sup> ~~the world~~ becomes more scientifically advanced, our understanding of the natural world changes considerably. New scientific observations contradict the doctrines of the church, and therefore the church is inevitably forced to adapt and change its conceptions and understanding of its doctrines. A doctrine is considered <sup>redundant</sup> the basic beliefs, <sup>redundant</sup> principles and teachings of a given religious group. <sup>one of</sup> Although the church might have been wrong <sup>ok</sup> in its previous ideas of <sup>sloppy & vague</sup> the world, it does not make the faith invalid. <sup>passive!</sup> It becomes difficult for one to decipher what the truth is and whether adaptation can be allowed in religion. Because there are differences between scientific observations and certain Christian doctrines, <sup>passive</sup> an explanation can be reached as to why these differences exist <sup>passive.</sup> when details are examined. It may seem that Christians change their doctrines just to conform to the ~~conflicting~~ views of science, but these discoveries help create new interpretations of scripture and show previous ideas as <sup>2</sup> simple misunderstanding.

passive.

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A controversial topic between <sup>which?</sup> the church and scientists deals with the idea of the universe <sup>Then it's not a topic, is it?</sup>

and the earth. ~~The idea of understanding the world we live in has been a topic of debate numerous times and over plentiful sub-issues.~~ <sup>meaningless</sup> Andrew White, <sup>by whom?</sup> an admired writer on the relationship between religion and science, states that one of the Christian church's first doctrines <sup>+</sup> dealing with Earth said that the world was flat. ~~There was a thought that stated~~ If one sailed too far, then they would fall off the edge of the world. This idea seemed conceptually sound at the time, until Magellan sailed around the world <sup>3</sup> proving that the world was not flat. Here is the first example of science disproving a Christian doctrine. The Church ~~received numerous repercussions for being incorrect.~~ They lost power, followers and validity when this doctrine was proved wrong. <sup>just one? which?</sup> Immediately following, a problem arose on the premise of the contradiction between the church doctrine and scientific evidence. However, the doctrine could be changed if

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→ Not "science", but merely direct observation.

scripture was ~~looked at~~ <sup>examined</sup> from different perspective. People were forced to learn history and find contextual support. This leads one to wonder why or how such a difference in ideas could be reached.

all of it?

too broad & vague  
④

tautology (almost)

In Christianity, there often are times where the way things are interpreted need to have context to support their correct meaning. A specific text could support a certain belief in one situation, but without perspective no ~~definitive~~ conclusion can be reached. For example, in Daniel 4:10 it says, "I saw while lying in my bed: I looked, and there before me stood a tree in the middle of the land. Its height was enormous. The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky; it was visible to the ends of the earth," (New International Version). Without looking at the context of this <sup>verse</sup> ~~scripture~~, it can support the concept of the flat Earth. The conclusion can be made that if a tree were ~~to be~~ visible for all the Earth to see, then the world must be flat. Therefore if the world were round, the people on the other side of the world would never be able to see this tree. Therefore ~~here is a way~~ the church could have ~~possibly~~ come to that conclusion that the world was flat. However, when looking at the context of the verses, it is talking about a dream and not a reality. King Nebuchadnezzar was asking Daniel to interpret this dream. Although this verse seems to support the idea of the flat Earth, it really does not. The lack of context when looking at the scripture may be a possible explanation why the doctrine of a flat Earth was accepted.

OK, but how do we now know when context is being insufficiently developed?

Another way that scripture can hinder or facilitate a doctrine is through alternative interpretation. A verse can have multiple meanings, depending on the circumstance. For example, Revelation 7:1 says, "And after these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the

earth, nor on the sea, nor on any tree,"(King James Version). This verse can possibly have the interpretation that in order for the earth to have corners, it must be flat. However, if you looked at the four corners of the earth as four directions-north, south, east and west- then the evidence is not as strong as it once ~~was~~ <sup>was</sup>. Another example of alternative meanings is found in Isaiah 41:9; it says "you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, 'You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off'" (New International version). This could literally mean that the Earth has ends and therefore it must be flat or metaphorically that God just calls people from all over the planet and doesn't necessarily supply support for the flat Earth. These passages show how a possible misinterpretation of scripture can lead to false doctrines. Church officials often adapt their interpretations of scripture to support the theories that science presents in the given time period.

Consequently, there must be scriptural evidence supporting <sup>that? ?</sup> must support the round Earth in order to support the changed doctrine. Isaiah 40:21-22 says, "Have ye not known? have ye not heard? hath it not been told you from the beginning? have ye not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers; that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in:" (King James Version). This verse supports the idea of the "circle" or spherical Earth. Although science proved the first doctrine of the Church to be incorrect, there is scriptural evidence that supports this new scientific observation. Therefore, a conclusion can be made that science does not trounce Christian doctrines, but rather shows the intricacy and support the bible shows. The difference is not fundamental but in the details. This proves that the Church doctrine could possibly just be a simple mistake.

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Church doctrines are susceptible to change based on scientific evidence. One of the Church's first doctrines stated that the Earth we lived on was flat and science proved this not to be true when Magellan sailed around the world. Ultimately the Church had to change its doctrine in order to adapt to these new observations and perspectives provided by science. However, this does not put Christianity to shame. There are possible explanations as to why certain disagreements or falsities were reached. For example, often ~~times~~ scripture is taken out of context. This causes a verse to seem like it means one thing, but in actuality it has a different application. Also, verses can have alternative meanings and multiple applications. The Bible does not specify whether it should be interpreted figuratively or literally ~~causing a different way~~ <sup>superfluous & ungrammatical</sup> of looking at scripture. Also, one must not think that just because one doctrine is proven wrong, there must not be evidence for the next. But this <sup>what?</sup> remains untrue as there is scriptural support for the round Earth as well. Therefore the disagreements met between science and religion are not fundamental, but can be explained when looking at the details.