

Chapter Eight

The Quest for Orthodoxy

There was a time, not so long ago, when *orthodoxy* and *heresy* were not problematic terms and the relationship between them was uncomplicated. Orthodoxy was the right belief, taught by Jesus to his disciples and handed down by them to the leaders of the Christian churches. In its most basic form, this orthodoxy came to expression in the words of the famous creeds of the Church, for example, the Nicene Creed, as it emerged from the great church councils of the fourth century and was later refined into words familiar to many Christians today:

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: By the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.¹

Heresy was any deviation from this right belief, in evidence, for example, among those who would claim that instead of one God there were two, or

twelve, or thirty. Or those who would deny that Christ was fully God, or that he became a real human being, or that he was born of a virgin, or that he was raised from the dead. Or those who denied the future resurrection.

According to this view, any *falsified* doctrine necessarily existed before its falsification, and any heretic who corrupted the truth must have had the truth itself available to corrupt. For this reason, orthodoxy was seen to be prior to heresy and true believers prior to false. By definition, then, orthodoxy was the original form of Christian belief, held by the majority of believers from the beginning, and heresy was a false perversion of it, created by willful individuals with small and pestiferous followings. Thus, in this view, *orthodoxy* really does mean what its etymology suggests: “right belief.” Moreover, it implies both originality and majority opinion. *Heresy*, from the Greek word for “choice,” refers to intentional decisions to depart from the right belief; it implies a corruption of faith, found only among a minority of people.

Orthodoxy and Heresy: The Classical View

These views of the relationship of orthodoxy and heresy dominated Christian scholarship for many centuries. Their classical expression can be found in the earliest written account of church history—including the history of internal Christian conflicts—written by the “father of church history,” Eusebius of Caesarea. In ten volumes, Eusebius’s *Church History* narrates the course of Christianity from its beginning up to his own time (the final edition was produced in 324/25).²

The account actually begins *before* Jesus’ birth, with a statement concerning the twofold nature of Christ, both God and man, and a discussion of his preexistence. That is an unusual way to begin a historical narrative, and it serves to show the account’s theological underpinnings. This is not a disinterested chronicle of names and dates. It is a history driven by a theological agenda from beginning to end, an agenda involving Eusebius’s own understandings of God, Christ, the Scriptures, the church, Jews, pagans, and heretics. The orientation is clearly orthodox, with Eusebius opposing anyone who advocates an alternative understanding of the faith. This opposition determined both what Eusebius had to say and how he said it.

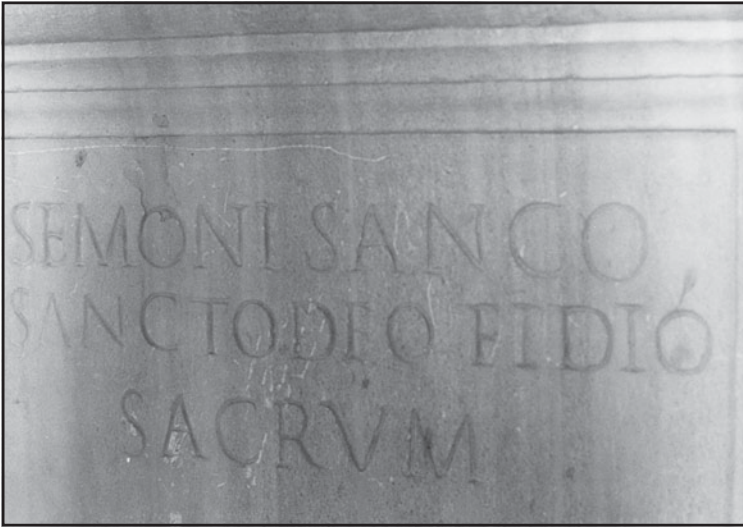
A remarkably sanguine picture of Christianity’s first three hundred years emerges in Eusebius’s account, a picture all the more striking in view of the external hardships and internal tensions Christians actually had to endure in the period. But Eusebius could detect the hand of God behind the scene at every stage, directing the church’s mission and destiny. Believers who were controlled and sustained by God’s Spirit faced persecution fearlessly, so that the church grew despite opposition.³ And “heresy” was quickly and effectively overcome by the original and apostolic teaching of the church’s vast majority, a teaching that, for Eusebius, was by definition orthodox.

Like many of his predecessors among the heresiologists, Eusebius maintained that Christian heresy began with a shadowy figure mentioned in the New Testament book of Acts, Simon Magus. Acts, a canonical book for Eusebius, indicates that Simon was a great magician in the city of Samaria, who used his deft powers to convince the Samaritans that he himself was “the Power of God that is called Great.” But then, according to Acts 8, someone with real power arrived in town, the Christian evangelist Philip, who preached the gospel of God, leading many to convert and be baptized. This included Simon, who was astounded by Philip’s miracles, which were truly divine, not manipulations of magic (Acts 8:9–13).

When the apostles of Jerusalem learned that Samaritans had converted to follow Christ and had been baptized, they sent two of their own, Peter and John, to provide the converts with the gift of the Spirit through the laying on of hands (8:14–17).⁴ We are not told how the Spirit’s presence was manifest at this point, but if its first appearance on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) is any indication, it must have been a spectacular moment. Simon in particular was impressed, but his wicked nature again took over. He tried to bribe the apostles to bring him into the inner circle and make their power available to him: “Give me also this power, that any one on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit” (8:19). Peter upbraided him for his insolence and sent him off with a reproach, urging him to repent of his wickedness. In humility, Simon asked that the apostles pray for him.

That is the end of the story in Acts. But it came to be expanded considerably in later Christian tradition. By the mid-second century Christians told legends about Simon that indicated he never did repent but continued in his sinful ways, focusing on supernatural power and on convincing others that he had it. According to Justin Martyr, living in mid-second-century Rome, Simon became entirely persuasive in his claims that he was a divine being. Justin notes that the Romans set up a statue to Simon on the Tiber island, with a Latin dedicatory inscription that read, “Simoni Deo Sancto,” meaning “To Simon, the Holy God” (*Apology* 1.26). Unfortunately, Justin appears to have gotten things muddled. As it turns out, the inscription was discovered many centuries later, in 1574. It actually read, “Semoni Sanco Sancto Deo.” What a difference a word makes. Semo Sancus was in fact a pagan deity worshiped by the Sabines in Rome, and this was a statue dedicated to him. Justin mistook the inscription as referring to the Holy Simon.⁵

The early Christian heresiologists narrated yet more extensive accounts of Simon after his brusque dismissal by the apostles. According to Irenaeus and his successors, Simon was the original Gnostic, who taught that he was personally the divine redeemer sent from the heavenly realm to reveal the truths necessary for salvation. Moreover, he had brought his “Primal Thought” with him, the first aeon that emanated from the one true God. This Primal Thought came embodied as a woman named Helen, whom, the heresiologists tell us, Simon had acquired at a local brothel. For these heresiologists, who delight in stressing the point, Gnostics have prostituted themselves in more ways than one.⁶



A Roman inscription to Semo Sancis, a Sabine diety worshiped in Rome. This inscription was mistakenly taken to refer to “the holy Simon (Magus)” by Justin Martyr. (Vatican)

Eusebius takes these stories found in Acts, Justin, and Irenaeus and develops them even further, establishing a precedent for the portrayal of heretical teachers throughout his ten-volume account. According to Eusebius, Simon was a demonically inspired opponent of the apostles who appeared in the course of the early Christian mission, performing black magic and misleading others to believe that he was divine. Not only did Simon advocate blasphemous and false doctrines; he also led a profligate life, openly consorting with the prostitute Helen and engaging in secret and vile rituals. Those he misled accepted his heretical teachings and, like him, indulged in scandalous practices: “For whatever could be imagined more disgusting than the foulest crime known has been outstripped by the utterly revolting heresy of these men, who make sport of wretched women, burdened indeed with vices of every kind” (*Church History* 2.13.8).⁷

Eusebius indicates, however, that God had an answer for this scurrilous heretic and raised up the apostle Peter to encounter him in Judea,

extinguishing the flames of the Evil One before they could spread. . . . Consequently neither Simon nor any of his contemporaries managed to form an organized body in those apostolic days, for every attempt was defeated and overpowered by the light of the truth and by the divine Word Himself who had so recently shone from God on humans, active in the world and immanent in His own apostles. (*Church History* 2.14.2–3)

Defeated in Judea, Simon then fled to Rome, where he achieved no little success, until Peter again appeared on the scene and once and for all dispensed

with this henchman of Satan through a radiant and powerful proclamation of the truth.

There is more vitriol than substance in Eusebius's account of Simon. The account nonetheless presents a schematic framing of the nature of Christian heresy, a framework that would prevail among church historians from late antiquity, down into the Middle Ages, and on up to the modern period. This is the "classical" view of internal doctrinal conflicts discussed above, in which orthodoxy is the "right opinion" taught by Jesus and his apostles and held by the majority of believers ever since, and heresy is "false belief" created by willful persons who have perverted the truth and convinced a minority of equally willful persons of their lies. In many of these accounts the corruptions of truth occur under the pressure of other, non-Christian influences, either Jewish traditions or, more commonly, pagan philosophy.

Although Eusebius was chiefly responsible for popularizing this view, by no stretch of the imagination was he the first to express it. In fact, as I have intimated, a similar perspective may be found already in the New Testament book of Acts, which portrays the true faith as based on the eyewitness testimony of the apostles, who spread this faith throughout the world by the power of the Holy Spirit. The churches they establish—all of them, necessarily, apostolic churches—stand in complete harmony with one another in every important point of doctrine and practice; even relative latecomers such as Paul agree with Jesus' original followers in all the essentials of the faith. To be sure, internal problems arise on occasion. But for Acts, in almost every instance these problems derive from the greed and avarice of individual Christians (such as the infamous Ananias and Sapphira; 5:1–11) or from the thirst for power of outsiders who have come to infiltrate the church (such as Simon Magus; 8:4–25). Most converts are said to remain true to the apostolic message. And theological issues are readily resolved by an appeal to apostolic authority, which, even after serious debate and reflection, reveals the most remarkable of all unities.⁸ According to Acts, disunities in the church can be attributed to the false teachings of degenerate individuals, portrayed as ravenous wolves who infiltrate the flock of Christ's sheep to do great damage but who cannot, ultimately, overcome a church unified behind the original apostolic teaching (10:28–31).

This view, afforded canonical status by Acts, became standard among proto-orthodox Christians of the second and third centuries, who, as we have seen, developed the notion of apostolic succession into a powerful weapon with which to fight their battles for truth.

Assaults on the Classical View

The "classical" understanding of the relationship of orthodoxy and heresy remained unchallenged, for the most part, until the modern period. Rather than

present an exhaustive history of scholarship, I have decided to focus on three key moments in the history of its demise, each involving a fundamental question: Did Jesus and his disciples teach an orthodoxy that was transmitted to the churches of the second and third centuries? Does Acts provide a reliable account of the internal conflicts of the earliest Christian church? And does Eusebius give a trustworthy sketch of the disputes raging in the post-apostolic Christian communities? The answer to all three questions, as now known, is probably No. Scholars who first propounded these answers engaged in daring, even risky, historical work. But their conclusions are now so widely held as to be virtually commonplace.

H. Reimarus, the Historical Jesus, and the Gospels

The first question involves the teachings of Jesus and his apostles and the reliability of the New Testament documents that convey them. Serious concerns about the historical accuracy of the Bible began to appear during the Enlightenment, when supernatural doctrines of divine revelation that guaranteed the truth of Scripture became matters of scholarly debate. Doubts that surfaced affected not only the increasingly secular discourses of science but also internal Christian reflections on the nature of Truth, the value of history, and the importance of human reason. The skepticism about church doctrine that came to a fevered pitch among western intellectuals in the eighteenth century found its way into the ranks of biblical and ecclesiastical scholarship, not just among those who saw themselves as standing outside the Christian tradition but especially among those within.

In some ways the beginning can be traced to a remarkable book published in German in a series of seven installments in 1774–78. These so-called Fragments totaled around four thousand pages and were only part of a larger work written by an erudite German scholar named Hermann Reimarus (1694–1768). Reimarus had the good professional sense not to publish the Fragments himself.⁹ It was only after his death that the philosopher G. E. Lessing uncovered them and made them available to the public. He did so not because he agreed with their perspective but because they raised arguments that he believed needed to be addressed.

Reimarus, the son of a Lutheran pastor in Hamburg, had been trained in philosophy, theology, and philology, and had spent the last forty years of his life as a professor of Hebrew and Oriental languages at the Hamburg Gymnasium (comparable to an advanced high school). The position afforded him time to write, and he produced several important works in a range of academic fields. But nothing proved so influential as these posthumous fragments on religion, the Bible, and the history of early Christianity. And among the fragments, none proved so controversial as the last, “The Intention of Jesus and His Disciples.”¹⁰

Early in his academic life Reimarus had traveled to England, where he became intrigued by the ideas propounded by English Deists. With them, he came to affirm the supremacy of human reason over a purported divine revelation. He rejected the existence of miracles and insisted that contradictions in historical narratives even when in the Bible compromise their reliability. These principles were rigorously applied in his discussions of the New Testament in the *Fragments*, leading to a complete rejection of the historical reliability of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection (which, when compared carefully with one another, appear to be filled with discrepancies) and of the apostles' claims that Jesus was a supernatural being.

According to Reimarus, Jesus did proclaim the coming Kingdom of God. But for Jesus, as for all Jews living at the time, this was to be a political entity, a real "kingdom" here on earth. Jesus maintained that there would be a victorious uprising by the Jews against the oppressive Romans leading to a new political state in Israel. Jesus himself would be at its head as the Messiah. This would happen in the near future, when the Jewish masses rallied around Jesus in support of their own liberation. Unfortunately, when the Roman authorities learned of Jesus' revolutionary preaching, they ruthlessly and effectively removed him from public view, crucifying him as a political incendiary.

The disciples, however, had grown accustomed to their itinerant lives as followers of Jesus. Intent on perpetuating the cause, they decided to found a religion in Jesus' name. And so they invented the idea that Jesus was the Messiah—not the political Messiah that everyone expected, but a spiritual Messiah who had died for sin and been raised from the dead. To prevent the refutation of their claims, they stole Jesus' body from the tomb, as hinted at still in the Gospel accounts (Matt. 28:13). Thus, for Reimarus, the disciples started the Christian religion. And this was not at all what Jesus intended. Jesus, then, was clearly not the Messiah in either the physical or spiritual sense—let alone the preexistent son of God or, as later theologians would have it, God himself, of the "same substance as the Father." Jesus was a Jew who preached a revolutionary message that placed him on the wrong side of the law and that led to his violent death. And that was the end of his story.

No scholar today agrees with this reconstruction of the historical Jesus.¹¹ But as Albert Schweitzer noted in his classic 1906 study, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, more than anyone else Reimarus began the critical quest to establish what really happened in Jesus' life, based on the premise that the Gospel narratives are not accurate reports but later accounts written by believers with a vested interest in their claims.¹²

The basic evidence for this point of view involves some of the major points that Reimarus himself made: There are differences among the Gospel accounts that cannot be reconciled. Some of these differences are minor discrepancies in details: Did Jesus die the afternoon before the Passover meal was eaten, as in John (see 19:14), or the morning afterwards, as in Mark (see 14:12, 22; 15:25)? Did Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt after Jesus' birth as in Matthew (2:13–23),

or did they return to Nazareth as in Luke (2:39)? Was Jairus's daughter sick and dying when he came to ask Jesus for help as in Mark (6:23, 35), or had she already died, as in Matthew (9:18)? After Jesus' resurrection, did the disciples stay in Jerusalem until he had ascended into heaven, as in Luke (24:1–52), or did they straightaway go to Galilee, as in Matthew (28:1–20)? Discrepancies like these (many of which seem minor, but which often end up being significant when examined closely) permeate the Gospel traditions.

Some of the differences are much larger, involving the purpose of Jesus' mission and the understanding of his character. What all the differences show, great and small, is that each Gospel writer has an agenda—a point of view he wants to get across, an understanding of Jesus he wants his readers to share. And he has told his stories in such a way as to convey that agenda.

But once we begin to suspect the historical accuracy of our Gospel sources, and find evidence that corroborates our suspicions, where does that lead us? With regard to our questions about the nature of orthodoxy and heresy in early Christianity, it leads us *away* from the classical notion that orthodoxy is rooted in the apostles' teaching as accurately preserved in the New Testament Gospels and *to* the realization that the doctrines of orthodox Christianity must have developed at a time later than the historical Jesus and his apostles, later even than our earliest Christian writings. These views are generally held by scholars today, based on in-depth analyses of the Gospel traditions since the days of Reimarus.¹³

F. C. Baur and the Earliest History of Christianity

The scholarly interest unleashed on the New Testament during the Enlightenment focused not just on Jesus and the Gospels but also on the historical reliability of the rest of the Christian Scripture. Of particular relevance to the traditional understanding of orthodoxy and heresy, questions arose concerning the accuracy of the description of the earliest Christian community in Acts. Another key moment in the history of scholarship came some six decades after the publication of Reimarus's Fragments, in the work of another German scholar, F. C. Baur (1792–1860).¹⁴

Baur was a towering figure in the history of nineteenth-century biblical and theological scholarship. Professor of New Testament and historical theology at the University of Tübingen from 1826 until his death, Baur was the founder of the so-called Tübingen School, with its distinctive understanding of the history of the first three hundred years of Christianity, including most famously a complete reevaluation of the historical trustworthiness of the New Testament writings. Discussions concerning the arguments of this "school," pro and con, dominated German- and even English-speaking scholarship for an entire generation, and they still affect research today.

Baur was a remarkable scholar in every way—brilliant, wide-ranging, and hardworking. Stories of his scholarly output are the stuff of legend. At his desk every morning at 4:00, by the end of his life he had produced the equivalent of a 400-page book every year, for forty years.

One of his earliest writings set the tone for the understanding of church history that became the keynote of his career and the writings of his students. In a work called “The Christ Party in the Corinthian Community,” Baur maintained that earliest Christianity, before the books of the New Testament had been completed, was characterized by a conflict between Jewish Christians, who wanted to maintain distinctive ties to Judaism and so keep Christianity as a particularist religion (it was *Jewish*), and Gentile Christians, who wanted to sever those ties in order to make it a universalistic religion (it was for *everyone*). The conflicts were spearheaded by the two key figures of the early church, Peter, head of the Jewish-Christian faction, and Paul, head of the Gentile Christians. According to Baur, there was no clear winner in the early back and forth between these two groups. Instead, a kind of historical compromise emerged, in which aspects of both the Jewish-Christian insistence on keeping the Law and the Gentile-Christian emphasis on salvation available to all came to be melded together into what eventually became the catholic church of both Jew and Gentile.

Anyone familiar with continental philosophy will recognize here the influence of Hegel, the German philosopher who understood history to proceed dialectically, with a thesis (in this case, Jewish Christianity) encountering an antithesis (Gentile Christianity), resulting then in a synthesis (catholic Christianity). This Hegelian understanding, however, was not simply taken over by Baur in generalized terms; it was worked out in great analytical detail with specific texts. Two keys to Baur’s argument were his claims that the history of the early conflict was shrouded by the emergent synthesis and that the earliest Christian writings could be situated in their genuine historical contexts only by analyzing their ideological proclivities.

The book of Revelation, for example, is thoroughly Jewish-Christian in its apocalyptic and particularist orientation (the thesis position); Paul’s letters to the Galatians and Romans are harshly anti-Jewish (the antithesis).¹⁵ These books then are all early in the conflict, representing the two competing sides. But Acts—to take a prominent and, for us, key example—is a mediating force, showing Peter and Paul in essential agreement on all major points and working out a compromising solution to the problem of particularism and universalism. It is striking, as members of the Tübingen school could point out, that the speeches of Peter (e.g., Acts 2) and of Paul (e.g. Acts 13) read almost exactly alike. Peter sounds like Paul and Paul sounds like Peter. According to the version of Acts, rather than being at loggerheads over how Jews and Gentiles are to react to each other in Christ, as they were according to Paul’s own account in Gal. 2:11–14, these two apostles, and all the others, are portrayed in perfect concord on the matter (Acts 10–11; 15). Acts is thus not a historical account of

what actually happened but an attempt to smooth over the acrimonious debates. It is a later work, not from the lifetime of Paul at all but written by someone who chose to reformulate the history of the early tensions within the church to show that the catholic solution had been in place from the beginning.

Again, no one subscribes to the precise views of Baur and the Tübingen school today. But the basic point is widely recognized that Acts, like the Gospels, is driven by a theological agenda that sometimes affects its historical accuracy. Probably the easiest way to demonstrate the point is to compare what Acts has to say about its main protagonist, the apostle Paul, with what Paul has to say about himself in his own letters. Not only are there small differences in detail concerning where Paul was, when, and with whom, there also are major discrepancies in important issues involving Paul's activities, the nature of his proclamation, and the overall portrayal of his character.

For instance, did Paul consult with the Apostles before going on the mission field? Acts says yes (Acts 9:26ff.), but Paul emphatically says no (Gal. 1:17). And what did Paul think about pagans who worship idols? Are they guilty before God for violating what they know to be true about him (so Romans 1:18–32), or are they innocent before God because they are ignorant of the truth about him (so Acts 17:22–31). In terms of the overall understanding of Paul's message and mission: Paul portrays himself as a missionary to the Gentiles who has abandoned, for the most part, adherence to the Jewish Law for the sake of his mission; Acts portrays Paul as a good Jew who has never done anything contrary to the Law. And what about Paul's interactions with his apostolic predecessors? Paul portrays himself as being at loggerheads with the apostles in Jerusalem, especially Peter (cf. Gal. 2:11–14); Acts portrays the entire Christian in harmony from the beginning to the end of Paul's mission (cf. Acts 15:1–24).

The significance of this evidence for our survey should be obvious. Scholars widely recognize that the Acts of the Apostles may be driven as much by a theological agenda as by a concern for historical accuracy. For that reason, it cannot be used uncritically to provide a historical basis for the classical understanding of the relationship of orthodoxy and heresy.¹⁶

Walter Bauer on Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity

The third question to be addressed concerns the reports of Eusebius himself, whether he can be trusted to give an accurate account of the relationships between proto-orthodox and heretical Christians over the course of the first three centuries. In the early days of Enlightenment scholarship, Eusebius was occasionally attacked for presenting a biased and unhistorical account.¹⁷ With new discoveries of primary sources showing the wide varieties of early Christianity, scholars of the nineteenth century sometimes went further and argued that his narrative was inaccurate and theologically driven. But it was not until the

early twentieth century that Eusebius's account came under severe scrutiny, leading to a devastating attack on his portrayal of early Christian unity and diversity.

The major study was published by yet another German scholar, of similar name to the founder of the Tübingen School, but not to be confused as a relation. Walter Bauer (1877-1960) was a scholar of great range and massive erudition; his Greek lexicon remains a standard tool for all students of New Testament Greek. His most controversial and influential work was a study of theological conflicts in the early church. *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (1934) was arguably the most important book on the history of early Christianity to appear in the twentieth century. Its precise aim is clear: to undercut the Eusebian model for the relationship of orthodoxy and heresy. The argument is incisive and authoritative, made by a master of all the surviving early Christian literature. Some scholars recoiled in horror at Bauer's views, and others embraced them fiercely, but no one in the field has been untouched by them. The repercussions are still felt today, as Bauer's analysis has changed forever how we look at the theological controversies prior to the fourth century.¹⁸

Bauer argued that the early Christian church did not consist of a single orthodoxy from which emerged a variety of competing heretical minorities. Instead, earliest Christianity, as far back as we can trace our sources, could be found in a number of divergent forms, none of which represented the clear and powerful majority of believers against all the others. In some regions of ancient Christendom, what later came to be labeled "heresy" was in fact the earliest and principal form of Christianity. In other regions, views later deemed heretical coexisted with views that came to be embraced by the church as a whole, with most believers not drawing hard and fast lines of demarcation between them. To this extent, "orthodoxy," in the sense of a unified group advocating an apostolic doctrine accepted by the majority of Christians everywhere, simply did not exist in the second and third centuries. Nor was "heresy" secondarily derived from an original teaching through an infusion of Jewish ideas or pagan philosophy. Beliefs that later came to be accepted as orthodox or heretical were competing interpretations of Christianity, and the groups that held them were scattered throughout the empire. Eventually one of these groups established itself as dominant, acquiring more converts than all the others, overpowering its opponents, and declaring itself the true faith. Once its victory was secured, it could call itself "orthodox" and marginalize the opposition parties as heretics. It then rewrote the history of the conflict, making its views and the people who held them appear to have been in the majority from apostolic times onwards.

As should be clear from this thumbnail sketch, Bauer objected to the very terms of the debate between orthodoxy and heresy, which he nonetheless used. For him, historians cannot use the words *orthodoxy* to mean right belief and *heresy* to mean wrong belief. Those are value judgments about theological

“truths.” But the historian is no more able to pronounce on ultimate “truth” than anyone else. That is to say, historians cannot decide who is right in the question of whether there is one God or two; they can simply show what different people have thought at different times. More than that, however, Bauer objected to the implications of the terms *orthodoxy* as referring to an original and majority position and *heresy* as referring to later corruptions. Much of his book, in fact, is devoted to showing that these implications are completely wrong. Why then continue to use the terms at all? For Bauer they continue to be useful designations not so much for the conflicts of the second and third centuries as for how these conflicts came to be understood in hindsight. Only after Gnostics, Marcionites, Ebionites, and others had been more or less weeded out was there a majority opinion that asserted itself; at that point it makes sense to speak of orthodoxy, that is, a set of beliefs subscribed to by the majority of believers. Speaking about orthodoxy in the earlier period, then, is a kind of intentional anachronism that highlights the problem by using its own terms.

Bauer’s views were not established simply by assertion. His book is filled with a detailed analysis of all the relevant sources that were available to him. Seventy years after its publication, it is still essential reading for scholars in the field. Bauer proceeds by looking at certain geographical regions of early Christendom for which we have some evidence—particularly the city of Edessa in eastern Syria, Antioch in western Syria, Egypt, Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Rome. For each place, he considers the available Christian sources and subjects them to the closest scrutiny, demonstrating that contrary to the reports of Eusebius, the earliest and/or predominant forms of Christianity in most of these areas were heretical (i.e., forms subsequently condemned by the victorious party). Christianity in Edessa, for example, a major center for orthodox Christianity in later times, was originally Marcionite; the earliest Christians in Egypt were various kinds of Gnostic, and so on. Later orthodox Christians, after they had secured their victory, tried to obscure the real history of the conflict. But they were not completely successful, leaving traces that can be scrutinized for the truth.

But how did the one form of Christianity, the form at the root of all major branches of the Christian church down to the present day, attain a level of dominance? For Bauer, this was the kind of Christianity that was found predominantly, though not exclusively, in the church of Rome, the capital of the empire, destined to become the center of Christianity. Is it a surprise that it was the *Roman* form of Christianity that became the Christianity of all people in the empire?

Bauer does not simply suggest that Rome was the obvious place from which orthodoxy would move forth and conquer the Christian world; he again provides evidence and makes a case. We have already seen that the earliest noncanonical Christian writing that we have, 1 Clement, is a letter from the Christians in Rome trying to influence the internal workings of the church of Corinth, urging in the strongest terms possible that the Corinthian presbyters

be reinstated. But why would Christians in Rome be concerned about the politics of the church in Corinth? Is it because the deposed presbyters, as opposed to the now ruling junta, actually supported the Roman understanding of Christianity? Could they have been proto-orthodox Christians, whereas their opponents were not?

As it turns out, we know of false teachers vying for authority in Corinth from the beginning—the “super apostles” referred to in Paul’s letters to Corinth (2 Cor. 11:5), who appear to have thought that there would be no future bodily resurrection of believers. These may well have been forerunners of Gnostic Christians, who devalued fleshly existence. At the time of 1 Clement, some thirty years after Paul’s letters, had this group finally won out in a coup? And were the Roman Christians taking action to correct the situation?

It appears, in any event, that the proto-orthodox letter of 1 Clement had its effect. The book itself came to acquire sacred status among the Christians in Corinth and was read as Scripture in their worship services some seventy years later, according to the then proto-orthodox bishop Dionysius. This would scarcely have been likely, had the Gnostic usurpers retained power.

As should be clear, for Bauer, the internal Christian conflicts were struggles over power, not just theology. And the side that knew how to utilize power was the side that won. More specifically, Bauer pointed out that the Christian community in Rome was comparatively large and affluent. Moreover, located in the capital of the empire, it had inherited a tradition of administrative prowess from the state apparatus through a kind of trickle-down effect. Using the administrative skills of its leaders and its vast material resources, the church in Rome managed to exert influence over other Christian communities. Among other things, the Roman Christians promoted a hierarchical structure, insisting that each church should have a single bishop. Given the right bishop, of course, certain theological views could then be preached and enforced. Moreover, the Roman influence, for Bauer, was economic: By paying for the manumission of slaves and purchasing the freedom of prisoners, the Roman church brought large numbers of grateful converts into the fold, while the judicious use of gifts and alms offered to other churches naturally effected a sympathetic hearing of their views. As the Dionysius of Corinth could say to Soter, bishop of Rome:

From the start it has been your custom to . . . send contributions to many churches in every city, sometimes alleviating the distress of those in need, sometimes providing for your brothers in the [slave] mines by the contributions you have sent. (Eusebius, *Church History* 4.23)

Over time, the proto-orthodox views of the Roman community became increasingly dominant in the cities connected in one way or another to the capital, and since all roads lead to Rome, eventually that meant most of the cities throughout the empire. By the end of the third century, the Roman form of Christianity had established dominance. All it took then was someone like

Eusebius to write the account, and not only the Roman proto-orthodox theology but also the Roman view of the history of the conflict came to be established for ages to come.

Reactions to Bauer

Scholars in Germany immediately recognized the importance of Bauer's radical rewriting of early Christian history. Unfortunately, the book was not translated into English until 1971. Most of the English-speaking world thus knew about it only secondhand and mainly through the refutations of Bauer's opponents. Even so, the impact of the book was enormous.¹⁹

Specific details of Bauer's demonstration were immediately seen as problematic. Bauer was charged, for good reason, with attacking orthodox sources with inquisitorial zeal and exploiting to a nearly absurd extent the argument from silence.²⁰ Moreover, in terms of his specific claims, each of the regions that he examined have been subjected to further scrutiny, not always to the advantage of his conclusions.

Probably most scholars today think that Bauer underestimated the extent of proto-orthodoxy throughout the empire and overestimated the influence of the Roman church on the course of the conflicts.²¹ Even so, subsequent scholarship has tended to show even more problems with the Eusebian understanding of heresy and orthodoxy and has confirmed that, in their essentials, Bauer's intuitions were right. If anything, early Christianity was even less tidy and more diversified than he realized.²²

As a result of this ongoing scholarship, it is widely thought today that proto-orthodoxy was simply one of many competing interpretations of Christianity in the early church. It was neither a self-evident interpretation nor an original apostolic view. The apostles, for example, did not teach the Nicene Creed or anything like it. Indeed, as far back as we can trace it, Christianity was remarkably varied in its theological expressions.

In Support of Bauer's Basic Thesis: A Modern Assessment of Early Christian Diversity

Probably the primary piece of evidence for this widespread variety comes from the proto-orthodox sources themselves, and in a somewhat ironic way. Eusebius and his successors quote these sources at length, including the books of the New Testament, in order to show that at every turn, their proto-orthodox forebears were successful in deposing false teachers and their heretical followers. But what they neglect to point out is that these "successes" presuppose the extensive, even pervasive, influence of false teachers in the early Christian communities.

Take our earliest Christian writings as an example, the letters of the apostle Paul. In nearly all his own churches, the ones he himself founded, there are

dangerous “false teachers” propounding an understanding of the gospel that Paul finds reprehensible or even damnable. In many instances, the opposing forces are winning out, so that Paul is compelled to intervene to reverse the trend. In his letter to the Galatians, for example, he contends with “Judaizers,” Christian missionaries instructing Paul’s converts that to be true members of the people of God they must adopt the ways of Judaism, including circumcision for the men. The success of these missionaries is evident in Paul’s angry response; he genuinely fears that the entire community is being led astray (Gal. 1:6–8, 3:1–5).

In his letters to the Corinthians, he is confronted with Christians again, from within his own church, who believe they have already experienced the full benefits of salvation and are already ruling with Christ as superspiritual humans. Some of their beliefs sound almost Gnostic; Paul has confronted some of his opponents face-to-face in Corinth and apparently experienced a public humiliation, suggesting that he may have lost the argument (see 2 Cor. 2:5–11, 13:2). He threatens another visit in which, he promises, things will be different.

His letter to the Romans is to a church that he did not found, and it is written to convince them that his gospel message is legitimate, so they will support him in his missionary endeavors further to the west, in Spain (see Rom. 1:8–15, 15:22–24). But why does he need to convince them? Evidently because they suspected *him* of teaching a false gospel. Someone else must have told them so.²³

Later letters written in Paul’s name presuppose internal tensions in his later churches: some kind of strange Jewish mysticism affecting the Christians of Colossae (Col. 2:8–23), a kind of fervent millenarianism in 2 Thessalonians, where people have quit their jobs expecting the end to come right away (2 Thess. 2:1–12, 3:6–15), some kind of proto-Gnosticism in 1 Timothy (1 Tim. 1:3–7).

Problems with false understandings of the faith appear in non-Pauline books of the New Testament as well. James strongly opposes Christians who have taken Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith to mean that good deeds are irrelevant for salvation. Revelation attacks antinomian (lawless) groups for bringing down the faithful. Jude and 2 Peter castigate false teachers who have infiltrated the churches with their foul teachings.

I cannot emphasize enough that all of these opponents in all of these communities identify themselves as followers of Christ. The Judaizers in Galatia, the proto-Gnostics of Corinth, those suspicious of Paul in Rome, the Jewish mystics of Colossae, the millenialists of 2 Thessalonians, the extreme Paulinists of James, the libertines of Revelation, and the vilified nameless of Jude and 2 Peter—what would all these groups of Christians have to say for themselves? We will never know for certain. But we do know that such people existed in the churches, understanding themselves to be Christian, maintaining that their views were not only believable but right. And they were acquiring large numbers of followers. In some cases, possibly most, they may have claimed to represent

views held by Jesus' own apostles, the original Christian views. One would think that the Judaizers in Galatia, at least, could make a pretty good case.

Even after the books of the New Testament had been written, the trend continues. There are the churches known to Ignatius in Asia Minor, all of them endangered by false teachers, either Judaizers or docetists or both. There are the heretics known to Irenaeus in Gaul, so numerous that he can't even count all the sects, let alone estimate their numbers, so nefarious that he has to devote five books to refuting their views. There are the heretics known to Tertullian in north Africa, who castigates his fellow proto-orthodox for being "scandalized by the very fact that the heresies prevail to such a degree" (*Prescription* 1), unwittingly admitting, thereby, that heretics could be found virtually everywhere. There are those known to Hippolytus in Rome, so influential that their false views had reached the highest echelons of the church administration, affecting the views of the bishop of Rome himself and threatening therefore to take over the entire church. And so it goes, on and on, for decades to come.

Not only the widespread diversity of early Christianity but also the blurred boundaries between what counted as orthodoxy and heresy—another of Bauer's points—appears to be borne out by the evidence. To be sure, there were certain clear battle lines, especially for the proto-orthodox. Anyone who claimed that there were thirty gods or who denied that Jesus came in the flesh would not escape Irenaeus's plodding attacks or Tertullian's rapier wit. But there were numerous issues that remained vague and unresolved in the second and even third centuries.

Even such basic questions as the nature of Christ's existence were not yet well defined. We have seen how this played out in the patripassianist controversy. But even on more basic issues there was an occasional lack of clarity. Docetic Christologies, of course, were strictly *verboten* among the proto-orthodox. Or were they? Both Origen and his predecessor, Clement of Alexandria, champions of proto-orthodoxy in their own day, expressed some very peculiar ideas about Jesus' body, peculiar at least to later theologians. Both maintained, for example, that Jesus' body could readily change appearance at will (e.g., Origen *Serm. Mount* 100). Clement went even further:

But in the case of the Savior, it would be ludicrous [to suppose] that the body, as a body, demanded the necessary aids in order for its duration. For he ate, not for the sake of the body, which was kept together by a holy energy, but in order that it might not enter into the minds of those who were with Him to entertain a different opinion of him; in a manner as certainly some afterwards supposed that He appeared in a phantasmal shape. But he was entirely impassible; inaccessible to any movement of feeling—either pleasure or pain. (*Miscellanies* 6.71.2)

In other words, Jesus ate simply to keep people from entertaining docetic notions about him, even though in fact he did not need to eat and could not feel

pleasure or pain. It is hard to imagine how that is the same thing as having a real body of flesh and blood. And it is even harder to imagine that any such claim would be acceptable to the orthodox of later times. But there it is: Clement, a leading proto-orthodox spokesperson, with a Christology in the shadows but completely acceptable to other proto-orthodox Christians of his day.

One final point needs to be made in support of Bauer's basic thesis about the relationship of orthodoxy and heresy. He was working, of course, only with the materials available to him at the time, in the early 1930s. Since then there have been additional discoveries, including entire documents that brilliantly confirmed aspects of his basic perspective, especially those of the Nag Hammadi library. Here was a collection of texts held dear by at least one group of Christians, possibly more, texts representing a wide sweep of alternative Christianities, by authors who assume, of course, that their views were right and that other views were wrong. Some of these texts attack proto-orthodox Christians for *their* false views.

Christianity was far more diverse, the battle lines were far more blurred, the infighting was far more intense than we could possibly have known depending just on Eusebius and the classical view of the relationship of orthodoxy and heresy.

The Victory of Proto-orthodoxy

We are still left with a question that perplexed Bauer and many others since his day. Granted that earliest Christianity was so widely diverse, how did the side we have identified as the proto-orthodox establish itself as dominant? We have already observed several factors that contributed to this ultimate victory:

- (1) The proto-orthodox claimed ancient roots for their religion—unlike, say, the Marcionites—by clinging to the Scriptures of Judaism, which, they insisted, predicted Christ and the religion established in his name.
- (2) At the same time they rejected the practices of contemporary Judaism as taught in these Scriptures—unlike, say, the Ebionites—allowing their form of Christianity to be a universal faith attractive to and feasible for the majority of people in the ancient world.
- (3) The proto-orthodox stressed a church hierarchy—unlike, say, some Gnostics, who believed that since everyone (in Gnostic communities) had equal access to the secret knowledge that brings salvation, everyone had an equal standing in the faith. The church hierarchy was invested with an authority that was used to determine what was to be believed, how church affairs (including worship and liturgy) were to be conducted, and which books were to be accepted as scriptural authorities.
- (4) The proto-orthodox were in constant communication with one another, determined to establish theirs as a worldwide communion. Witness the

allies who met Ignatius on his way to martyrdom and the letters he wrote in return, the letter written by the church in Rome to the church in Corinth, and the accounts of Christian martyrs sent out by the church of Smyrna on the occasion of the death of their beloved pastor, Polycarp. The proto-orthodox were interested not only in what happened locally in their own communities but also in what was happening in other like-minded communities. And they were interested in spreading their understanding of the faith throughout the known world.²⁴

There were other factors as well, which we will explore in the chapters that follow; but they relate in one way or another to each of the ones given above. It is striking that each of the four have one thing in common: All of them involve written texts. This may simply be due to an accident of history, that our surviving remains are principally textual. But there may be more to it than that, for it appears that most, possibly all, of the groups of early Christians placed a high premium on texts, making the use of literature a key element in the conflicts that were raging, as members of various groups wrote polemical tractates attacking their opponents, forged documents in the names of apostles to provide authorization for their own points of view, falsified writings that were in circulation in order to make them more acceptable for their own purposes, and collected groups of writings together as sacred authorities in support of their own perspectives. The battle for converts was, in some ways, the battle over texts, and the proto-orthodox party won the former battle by winning the latter. One of the results was the canonization of the twenty-seven books that we now call the New Testament. In the chapters that follow, we will consider various aspects of this literary battle for supremacy, to see further how this one group emerged as victorious and established, then, the character of Christianity as it was to come down to us in the modern age.