



Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earlier Christianity

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Themelios 2.1 (September 1976): 5-14.
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In April 1975 the Historical Theology Group of the Tyndale Fellowship held a conference at Dunblane, Scotland, at which they considered the theme of 'Heresy'. This paper, first delivered at that conference, and subsequently at a meeting of the Scottish Divinity Faculties, examines the view, which has gained a wide following since the publication in English of Bauer's important book, that the categories of 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy' are a later development, foreign to New Testament Christianity. Dr Marshall, Senior Lecturer in New Testament Exegesis at the University of Aberdeen, was for several years editor of the TSF Bulletin.

There is a story, possibly apocryphal, which tells how the Roman Catholics once advertised a public meeting in Sydney, Australia; on their posters they presented their claim to be the upholders of pure Christianity by means of the slogan 'The Faith of our Fathers'. Not to be outdone, the Protestants arranged a rival meeting with the redoubtable T. C. Hammond as their speaker, and they advertised as their title, 'The Faith of our Grandfathers'. The title of this essay is somewhat similar to the Protestant parody. It is a secondary elaboration of a more famous phrase, and will be readily recognized as a parody of the title of a well-known book by Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy In Earliest Christianity*. As with a number of other significant German books, the importance of this one was not recognized in this country until long after its original publication. English-reading students have had to wait until the last twelve years to see translations of the works of William Wrede, Wilhelm Bousset and Rudolf Bultmann, and with them of W. Bauer, first published in 1934 and not available in English until 1972 (in America, 1971).¹ Unlike the others, however, which hit the headlines on the Continent at the time of publication, Bauer's work came at a time when the German church was preoccupied with other more pressing issues, and it had to wait till after the war for due recognition.

Bauer's basic thesis was a polemical one and is best summed up in his own words: he argued that, according to the generally accepted interpretation of the situation, 'Jesus revealed the true teaching to his apostles who in their turn went out into all the world after the ascension to hand on the unadulterated gospel to the peoples. It was only after their death that obstacles arose for the preaching from the Christian side. For now some people who were misled by the devil gave up the apostolic preaching which had been the means of their conversion and put in its place their own human ideas. Thus in the post-apostolic period there arose heresies of various kinds which could certainly be very annoying to the church but never in any form really dangerous.'

'This conception (he went on) must be tested for its accuracy by means of history. Did the order: unbelief, orthodox belief, false belief, which is said to have been the case everywhere really correspond with the facts or not, or was it the case to a limited extent that must be worked out and expressed?'²

In order to settle this question Bauer thought it best to start outside the disputed area of the NT

writings. And so he proceeded to do a package tour of the world of early second century Christianity in order to discover whether the rise of what came to be called heresy was always preceded by orthodox teaching from which it had deviated. A close study of the rise of the church in Edessa and Alexandria suggested to him that in the beginning so-called unorthodox groups were predominant; what was later regarded as orthodoxy was represented at best by small groups, so that from the very beginning so-called heretical and orthodox forms of the faith existed side by side. The churches were more 'orthodox' in Asia Minor, but various arguments suggest that there were strong pockets of unorthodox Christianity in this area. If the position was different in Corinth, where the church certainly began with strong heretical tendencies, this was due to the influence of Rome imposing its views on the church. It could be said that 'the form which Christianity gained in Rome was led to

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victory by Rome and thus established as orthodoxy'.³ Bauer then went on to show how Rome established its own doctrinal position as the orthodox one. It was largely because the heretics were independent of one another and unable to unite with one another in opposition to Rome that they eventually succumbed to her influence. The great mass of middle-of-the-road Christians who might well have been won over by either wing of the church in fact threw in their lot with Rome.

Bauer thus concluded that what later came to be regarded as orthodoxy was only one of several competing systems of Christian belief, with no closer links to any original, so-called 'apostolic Christianity' than its rivals, and that it owed its victory in the competition more to what we might call political influences than to its inherent merits.

The corollary to be drawn from Bauer's discussion is that things were no different in the first century. Thus R. Bultmann, who fully accepted Bauer's arguments, stated: 'The diversity of theological interests and ideas is at first great. A norm or an authoritative court of appeal for doctrine is still lacking, and the proponents of directions of thought which were later rejected as heretical consider themselves completely Christian, such as Christian Gnosticism. In the beginning *faith* is the term which distinguishes the Christian Congregation from Jews and the heathen, not *orthodoxy* (right doctrine). The latter along with its correlate, *heresy*, arises out of the differences which develop within the Christian congregations.'⁴ It is interesting, however, that Bultmann proceeds to say, 'In the nature of the case this takes place very early'.

The argument was taken further by G. Strecker in an investigation of Jewish Christianity in an appendix to the 1964 edition of Bauer's book; he argued that Jewish Christianity was diverse in character and that what must be considered as historically primary in the first century was seen to be heretical when compared with what later was regarded as orthodoxy.⁵

A somewhat similar point of view appears to be represented by Stephen S. Smalley in his examination of 'Diversity and Development in John'. He submits that in the Gospel of John, as distinct from the Epistles, we have a considerable diversity of views expressed, some of which could be seized upon as supporting their cause by later, orthodox writers, others of which could be seized upon by the heretics. He therefore states that: 'John's diversity can hardly be regarded as consciously orthodox *or* heretical; it is neither one nor the other. If such considerations had influenced John's writing, it is very unlikely that he would have left so much on the "orthodox" side unsaid, and so much on the "heretical" side open to misconstruction, to be used eventually in evidence against him.'⁶

The scope of the present essay, confined as it is to the first century, enables me to side-step a discussion of the correctness or otherwise of Bauer's thesis as it applies to post-apostolic Christianity-although it must be observed that if it is inapplicable to the second century, it can

hardly be applied to the first century. On the whole, it seems to have been subjected to considerable modification in detail, but few have been willing to contradict its main lines. If it has done nothing else, it has emphasized the prevalence of diversity in the second century church and the difficulty that existed in attempting to draw clear boundaries between what was orthodox and what was heretical.⁷ My starting-point is rather the fact that Bauer had the effrontery to label the second century as 'earliest Christianity', and I want to look at the period which is in fact earlier than this, the period of the New Testament itself.

1. Unity, variety and diversity

In the essay which I have already quoted, S. S. Smalley suggests that the key to our problem in John's Gospel may lie in the categories of diversity and development. These two terms give us a set of co-ordinates against which the ideas of the early church might be plotted in such a way that the variety of ideas at any one given time may be seen, and also the differences in ideas between one period of time and another. A recent book of essays by H. Koester and J. M. Robinson has used the term 'trajectories' to give expression to this kind of approach, although it is obvious that the name, like the word 'canon', is simply a new invention to

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describe a concept of which scholars have long been conscious.⁸

Granted that there is diversity and development in the theologies expressed in the New Testament, the question is whether this is the same thing as saying that no distinction between orthodoxy and heresy was being made, or that this concept did not exist prior to the development of a vocabulary to describe it. And at once it is obvious that the two things are not the same. It is possible, in other words, for there to be a variety in presentation of the Christian faith without the varied presentations being incompatible with one another. It is probable that in the church at Corinth different cliques attached themselves to the names of Paul, Apollos and Cephas. No doubt these three men presented the gospel in different ways, and it may well be that their followers developed their own individual ideas, but Paul was quite clear that there was no fundamental incompatibility between himself and his colleagues in the presentation of the gospel. 'We are fellow workers for God'; 'All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos, or Cephas,... all are yours' (1 Cor. 3: 9, 21f.). In the same way, while it was judged politic for there to be two Christian missions, one to the circumcised and one to the uncircumcised, they were in fellowship with one another, and there is no suggestion of any fundamental disagreement between them (Gal. 2:7-9). Bauer's attempt to interpret Paul's statement otherwise is somewhat mischievous.

The fact of such a basic unity was emphasized by A. M. Hunter in a book which is of importance out of proportion to its size. In *The Unity of the New Testament*⁹ he argued that the major writers of the New Testament show a basic unity in their testimony to one Lord, one church and one salvation. Writing in 1943, Hunter was working against a background of stress on the diversity within the New Testament. This was presented in another product of Scottish theology by E. F. Scott in *The Varieties of New Testament Religion*.¹⁰ He was equally rightly concerned to emphasize the lack of uniformity in the New Testament: the writers 'are all inspired by the one faith, but every teacher interprets it differently, as he has known it in his own soul'.¹¹ Both of these points of view need to be heard, but perhaps it is the voice of Hunter which has had less attention than it deserves in our own day. Where Scott is distinctly woolly in his survey and makes generalizations do duty in place of hard facts, Hunter is careful to give evidence for his statements and to argue a case which is the more impressive by reason of its restraint and

caution.

But Hunter was concerned with the writers of the New Testament. He made no attempt to claim that Paul and his opponents in Galatia had a basic unity in their theology. The question that now arises concerns the degree of variety in the life and thought of the early church which is reflected in the New Testament: at what point, if any, does variety become a deviation from the truth?

2. The later books of the New Testament

We shall now make an attempt to look at the evidence relevant to this second question, and like Bauer, it may be helpful to begin with what are usually thought to be the latest writings in the New Testament, then turn to the generally accepted letters of Paul, and finally to the Gospels.

In the *Pastoral Epistles*¹² we have a writer who is confronted by teaching which he regards as false in the churches for which he has a responsibility. At the outset of 1 Timothy there is an instruction not to allow people to teach 'different doctrine'; it is associated with speculation about myths and genealogies and it leads to vain discussion instead of growth in faith. Such teaching appears to have rested on what the author regarded as a misunderstanding of the law, and to have led to an intellectual type of religion which ignored the claims of conscience. Over against it the author places 'healthy doctrine', which he characterizes as being in accordance with the gospel (1 Tim. 1: 3-11). This basic theme is repeated throughout the Pastorals, most clearly in 1 Timothy and Titus. It is probable that the writer was confronted by a type of Gnosticizing teaching with strong Jewish elements, which laid stress on knowledge and which led both to asceticism and to moral licence. What is important is that he is clearly aware of its existence and of its distinction from what he regards as the truth. The lines are firmly drawn. The

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teaching is 'other' and does not conduce to spiritual 'health'. It produces moral behaviour which is incompatible with godliness. Over against it the writer places healthy teaching, and he clearly reckons with the existence of traditions in the church, such as the 'faithful sayings', which enshrine the truth of the gospel. He regards the church as being the pillar and bulwark of the truth.

It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that in these Epistles the writer is conscious of being the defender of truth and that he is prepared to take disciplinary measures against those who persist in erroneous beliefs. The very word *hairetikos* is used in this connection. It is perhaps not unfair to say that the Pastorals were composed in a situation of false teaching threatening the truth, and that their basic purpose is to deal with this situation by outlining the true nature of Christian living, and by equipping the church with leaders who will be able to promote the cause of orthodoxy.

This understanding of the Pastorals was, of course, shared by Bauer, but it did not basically affect his thesis because he was prepared to put them at a rather late date and to see them as directed against Marcionite teaching. If this late dating is wrong, an obvious weakness in Bauer's case is opened up. The trend in recent scholarship is in fact to date the Epistles in the first decade of the second century, and this is a significant shift in placing them historically.¹³ Even this date is probably too late, and there is good reason to place them considerably earlier. But the commonly accepted date is sufficient to allow us to make our point, that a *distinction between orthodoxy and heresy had come into existence by the end of the first century or just after.*

The *Revelation* can probably be dated in the last decade of the first century. Its author's main concern was to strengthen the church to face persecution, but in order to achieve this aim he realized that the church must be purified of false belief and immorality; otherwise it would fall under the judgments of God on the world at large. His attack is directed mainly against attempts to combine idolatry and idolatrous practices with Christian faith. The apostolic decree requiring abstinence from food sacrificed to idols and from immorality (Acts 15: 29) was evidently being flouted. There were people around who called themselves apostles, and there was a prophetess who gave the weight of her authority to idolatrous practices and immorality (Rev. 2:2, 20). The implication is that the upholders of this position felt it necessary to claim support for their views by appeal to ecclesiastical office and to Spirit-inspired revelations. It looks as though they formed a definite group in the church. Their teaching may well have had a Gnosticizing tinge, as is suggested by the allusion to the deep things of Satan (Rev. 2:24). The other members of the church are said to have tested the false prophets and found them wanting; they are criticized for not throwing out Jezebel as well. But what is perhaps of greatest interest is that the group attacked by John are referred to as Nicolaitans, followers of Nicolaus (Rev. 2: 6, 15). They are thus known by the name of their leader, real or imaginary, in the same way as later groups of heretics were identified. This is to my knowledge the first example of such a procedure, and it is highly significant as showing that already within New Testament times *it was possible to identify and label a group regarded as heretical*. In other words, the lines were already being clearly drawn. Unfortunately, much is left obscure; we should like to know how the heretics saw themselves, how they established their claim to authority, and how they regarded their opponents.

We are not surprised to find the word *haireisis* being used in its developed sense in what is often regarded as the latest writing in the New Testament, 2 Peter (2:1). The writer is concerned about the rise of false teachers in the church. Their behaviour was licentious; it appears to have involved a rejection of the morality enshrined in the law, and to have questioned some aspects of Christian teaching, including the hope of the parousia. Above all they despised and reviled the accepted authority in the church. They evidently appealed to the writings of Paul in support of their teaching, and imposed what the author regarded as a false interpretation upon them. They also claimed prophetic inspiration. The picture is similar to that in Revelation, but the heresy appears to have gone further, and to have taken the step of claiming Pauline support. We should naturally like to know how they interpreted Paul. It seems probable that some of his teaching may have been understood as sanctioning antinomianism, although it is hard to find passages in his existing Epistles which give much support to such views.

The situation reflected in *Jude* appears to have been similar to that in 2 Peter. Here again opponents of the writer are to be found in the church, and have not yet been ejected. They are castigated for their immorality and contentiousness which have caused divisions in the church. We learn nothing

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about the actual content of their teaching. The author's reply is to call his readers back to the tradition which they have received, to the faith once for all delivered to the saints; he has no doubt that this stands in opposition to the teaching which he is criticizing. This may reflect a slightly earlier stage than in 2 Peter, since the heretical appeal to tradition may well have followed the orthodox appeal by claiming that the orthodox were misinterpreting it.

A clear consciousness of differing opinions in the church is found in 1-3 John. In 2 John the writer speaks of deceivers who deny the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. There are people who do not abide in the doctrine of Christ. It is probable that some off-beat christological teaching is in mind, possibly a docetic denial that Jesus really was the Christ, or that the Christ really became incarnate in Jesus. In 1 John the group has come out into the open and begun a

separate existence. Three important facts characterize the Elder's reply. One is that he attacks this point of view on the intellectual level by asserting that the doctrine of God is jeopardized by this teaching. One cannot truly believe in the Father without also believing in the Son. In other words, a heresy which may have seemed innocuous or marginal is shown to affect understanding of basic doctrine. This point is stressed throughout 1 John. Second, the writer's stress on the need for love, shown in practical ways, *is* a flank attack on his opponents' position, but he does not indulge in empty abuse against them; rather he invites his readers to apply the test of 'By their fruits you shall know them'. The third point is that the writer holds that fellowship should not be extended to those who maintain this point of view; we may compare the similar command in Titus 3: 10f. Those who adopt such teaching are equated with antichrist (*i.e.* the opponent of Christ, rather than somebody taking the place of Christ). A distinction between different groups with different doctrines is consciously taking place.

It is not clear whether a situation of heresy is reflected in 3 John. It is well known that E. Käsemann has proposed that Diotrephes was really the champion of orthodoxy, attempting to stifle the influence of the unorthodox Elder, but there is good reason to reject this interpretation.¹⁴ On the other hand, there is no proof that Diotrephes was unorthodox; at the most he appears to have been ambitious and curt with his possible rivals.

We can quickly pass over *James* and *I Peter* in our survey. The writer of the former letter, it is true, has been thought to be critical of Paul, but his real bone of contention is with Christians lacking in the works of love who probably claimed Paul in support of their own position. From both *James* and *2 Peter* it can be seen that appeal was made to Paul in support of opinions that were denied by other New Testament writers; but both *2 Peter* and *James* regard Paul as being on their side, and *James* does not give the impression of regarding the people whom he is criticizing as heretics.

We may summarize our conclusions so far by noting that in the late first century church there was a consciousness of the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy. Appeal was made on both sides to the teaching of the apostles and to the voice of prophecy. There was a consciousness of an inherited body of belief, 'the faith', and excommunication was beginning to be used as a weapon. There is no reason to suppose that these ideas developed without previous preparation: we are justified in examining the other New Testament documents to see whether they reflect a development towards this position.

3. Paul

We turn, therefore, back to Paul. Almost everywhere in his writings we can detect the presence of opponents who questioned his teaching or put up some other teaching instead of it. To be sure, it is unlikely that this is the case in *1 Thessalonians* where such problems as arose were probably due simply to the inadequate grounding which his converts had had in his teaching before he was forced to leave them. The situation is one of questions and uncertainties rather than opposition to his teaching. The situation in *2 Thessalonians* is at first sight very similar, but it is interesting that in attacking the view that the day of the Lord has already arrived Paul should refer to the possibility of a spirit or word or letter purporting to be from himself, and that he urges the readers to hold fast to the traditions which he has taught them orally or by letter. Further, he lays stress on the importance of what he says in this letter to the extent that anyone who does not accept its teaching is to be solemnly warned and disciplined. Such strict discipline is not unparalleled in Paul (*1 Cor.* 5). The significant facts are rather that Paul considers the error which he is opposing to be so serious and that he suspects that his own authority has been used to defend it. It is not surprising that this Epistle has been thought to be post-Pauline, and to

reflect an attempt by the orthodox to claim Paul's

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authority for their own position instead of that of their rivals. There appears to be an organized opposition against the Pauline position. But the situation is comprehensible if the life of the church is in danger of being crippled by an apocalyptic enthusiasm which has upset normal daily life. Nor would it be surprising if a prophet claimed to speak in the name of the Lord, and even claimed the authority of Paul (*cf.* Acts 19: 13). The Pauline situation remains the more probable, and, if correct, it shows that at an early date teaching opposed to that of Paul was being promulgated with a false appeal to his authority, and that the answer to this teaching was for Paul himself to claim that he had been wrongly interpreted. It was presumably because of this direct misrepresentation of his own views that Paul spoke out so strongly against those who rejected his authority in Thessalonica.

Nobody denies that Paul himself faced opposition when he composed *Galatians*, but the situation is more than a little complex. We need to distinguish between the opposition in Galatia itself, and that which Paul experienced in Jerusalem and Antioch. Then we must assess correctly the nature of the opposition experienced by Paul. There are two main views of this, namely that it was either Judaizing or Gnostic, but the case that it was Judaizing is the stronger of the two. If so, this means that the same type of opposition was prevalent in Galatia and on the home front. The opposition in Galatia was Jewish or Jewish-Christian in inspiration, and it received the full force of Paul's opposition because it compromised the doctrine of faith in Christ which he regarded as all-important. Acceptance of the contrary point of view called the mission to the Gentiles in question. Paul's defence, as is well known, rested on an appeal to history, to experience and to Scripture. He was able to claim that his message had been accepted by the leaders of the church in Jerusalem; the weakness in this argument was the strange case at Antioch where Peter and Barnabas sided against him, and Paul never says that they changed their minds, although the friendly allusions to them in 1 Corinthians would imply that they did in fact do so. But, while it is possible that Paul passed over their initial reaction with a discreet silence, it is more likely that he was simply carried away by the force of his own argument. His second appeal was to experience, both his own and that of his converts; he could point to his own revelation of Jesus at his conversion, which for him had immediate authority, and he could also point to the way in which his converts received the gift of the Spirit apart from the law. His third appeal was to Scripture, showing from the Old Testament that God's principle of working with men, even in the era of the law, was by faith. Since his converts had not yet apparently succumbed to what he regarded as error, he was able to address them in terms of appeal rather than condemnation; but he spoke in no uncertain terms about those who were leading them astray. He called down God's curse on anybody who was doing this. There could be no other gospel than Paul's gospel. There is no appeal to apostolic authority here other than his own; Paul argues from his own experience of Christ.

By the time of I *Corinthians*, however, Paul is more conscious of the significance of tradition, to which he makes appeal more than once. His bases for argument include the commands of the Lord, as well as his own consciousness of inspiration by the Spirit. He can appeal to the practice of other apostles. This suggests that the opposition to Paul stood outside the mainstream of the church, even if there was appeal to Apollos and Cephas. Basically, Paul appears to have been confronted by two groups in the church, one Jewish Christian and the other incipient Gnostic. The former were 'weak' in faith, but not heretical; Paul thinks they are wrong, but does not condemn their error, and indeed seeks a sympathetic approach to them from the rest of the church. On the point at issue, he tended to side with the strong Christians. But the impression we gain is of a church with tendencies that could lead to error, judged by Pauline standards, rather than with full-blown heresy. There was immoral and licentious behaviour to be corrected. There was an over-emphasis on spiritual gifts unaccompanied by love. There may have been a false understanding of the resurrection. But the whole tone of the letter is that of a wise pastor, rather

than that of someone determined to stamp out organized opposition at any cost. The extent of the opposition to Paul in Corinth at this point can easily be exaggerated.

The fact of opposition is clearer in 2 Corinthians 10-13, but in this middle period of Paul's work the problems of interpretation are complex. Here we do hear of preaching of *another Jesus*, a *different spirit* and a *different gospel* which did not lead to reformation of life (2 Cor. 11: 4). There was opposition to Paul by persons who claimed apostolic status, who regarded themselves as engaged on a mission similar to his own and under superior auspices. They were in danger of assuming control of the church at Corinth. Paul was strenuously opposed to them, as they were to him. He speaks of them in the strongest terms as servants of Satan,

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and it may well be that they regarded him in similar terms. There is no doubt, then, that lines were being drawn between opposing sides. But what was the basis of the disagreement with them? I am not convinced by the theory that they were Gnostics, nor that they thought of themselves as divine men preaching a Jesus who was similarly a divine man. The truth is that the nature of the doctrinal disagreement scarcely comes to the surface in this section of the Epistle. They were Jews, possibly claiming special credentials from Jerusalem, people whom Paul regarded as proud of their position and making extravagant claims and demands for themselves in virtue of it, people who claimed spiritual visions and revelations. But it is extraordinarily hard to discern exactly what they believed and taught. Paul simply places his own claims over against theirs and attacks their claims rather than their message. Nor is it clear why they were so opposed to Paul. Did they regard his teaching as false, or were they simply jealous of his success, or what? And suppose some third party came along: how could he tell which group was 'orthodox'? These questions can hardly be answered for lack of information.

In *Romans* we have evidence of people who create dissensions and stand in opposition to the doctrine which Paul taught; they are not in Paul's eyes true servants of Jesus, but they serve their own carnal natures. Schmithals regards them as Gnostics, but it is doubtful whether the evidence takes us that far. But it may be that the same sort of rival mission as we found in 2 Corinthians is reflected here, and that Paul feared persons travelling around in his footsteps and contradicting his teaching. Once again we note that their teaching is not detailed nor refuted by Paul; he simply warns against them, and their deceitful methods of establishing their views. This is significant as regards the later Epistles which, it is sometimes said, reflect a lack of argument with heresy in contrast to Paul's own earlier attempts to deal more rationally with it.

In *Philippians* again there is danger to the church from persons who uphold circumcision. Here the most plausible identification of the opponents of Paul is as Judaizers. But the situation is complicated by the mention of people who claimed some kind of perfection and those whom Paul regarded as enemies of the cross who pandered to their own fleshly desires. This wording is similar to that in *Romans* and suggests that the same group were on their rounds. They could be antinomians. The danger comes from outside the church, and perhaps this is why Paul does not deal with its errors in detail; it may be a potential rather than a real situation.

The same is possibly true of *Colossians*. Here it has been traditional to find evidence of a developed Gnostic heresy, but recently M. D. Hooker has strongly challenged this assumption, and shown that it is doubtful whether there was a coherent, organized heresy.¹⁵ Paul's teaching, it is said, 'seems to us to be quite as appropriate to a situation in which young Christians are under pressure to conform to the beliefs and practices of their pagan and Jewish neighbours, as to a situation in which their faith is endangered by the deliberate attacks of false teachers'.¹⁶ Whatever be the situation, Paul's reply is to call the church back to the way in which it received Christ as Lord, and to the gospel which it preached throughout all the world. The doctrines of the person of Christ and of union with him leading to ethical behaviour are his reply to false

versions of the gospel.

4. The Gospels

We turn, finally, to the Gospels before attempting to draw some conclusions. Traces of polemic have been found in all of them. This is least obvious in the case of *Luke* along with its companion, Acts. Certainly there is one clear warning against the rise of heresy in the church in the post-Pauline period, which may well reflect earlier struggles, but on the whole little is said about the nature of such troubles. The attempt by C. H. Talbert to find Gnostics under Luke's bed seems to me singularly unsuccessful.¹⁷ What we do have is the early struggle of the church to deal with Judaizing tendencies, and this struggle is regarded as being successfully resolved in favour of the Pauline position. There is a point of view which is resisted and shown to be wrong, and the proof is found in the manifest willingness of God to accept the Gentiles and bestow the Spirit upon them apart from acceptance of circumcision. The argument is not dissimilar to that in Galatians.

In *Matthew* E. Schweizer has found opposition to a group of enthusiasts who sat loose to the ethical teaching of Jesus.¹⁸ It is this Gospel more than any other which bears witness to the fact of a mixed church with true and false believers in it. But the nature of a Gospel prevents direct address

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to such people, and all that can be done is to present the relevant teaching of Jesus, in some cases carefully underlined to bring out the significant points for the situation.

It is chiefly in *Mark* that recent students have found polemic against heresy. Especially in the work of T. J. Weeden¹⁹ and N. Perrin²⁰ we have the suggestion that the disciples are identified with a false view of the person of Jesus over against which Jesus himself presents the truth. They were tempted to think of him as Messiah and Son of God in terms of a divine man working miracles, whereas Mark insisted that this view must be qualified by the preaching of Jesus as the Son of man who must suffer and die before being glorified. The main essentials of this position are accepted by R. P. Martin, who, however, does not identify the disciples as the carriers of the false view.²¹

With respect to *John* something similar has been claimed, John being seen as the corrector of a too simple view of Jesus as a docetic figure, a worker of signs, but there is too much uncertainty here for us to offer any assured conclusions.²²

5. Historical conclusions

We have now surveyed the evidence relative to the positions of the writers of the New Testament. What have we found?

1. We have found that *teaching regarded by them as false was extremely common*. In nearly every book of the New Testament this has been evident. The significance of this must not be over-estimated. Van Unnik has rightly observed that we must not seek heresy everywhere as the determinative factor in the composition of the New Testament." Alongside the need to combat it there was what is probably more important, the proclamation of the gospel. "The development of

the earliest church was not set in motion by the almost unbridgeable tensions between Christians, but by the positive task of being witnesses of Jesus Christ in a world whose demands continually summoned them to provide answers.' Nevertheless, it is clear that from New Testament times the New Testament writers were conscious of rivalry and teaching opposed to their own.

2. There is a *development* in the presence of false teaching. The New Testament writings reflect an early stage in which the church was formulating its attitude on the question of circumcision and the Mosaic law. But from Galatians onwards Paul regards that issue as settled, and is intolerant of any who impose Jewish legalism on Gentiles. He does not object to Jews keeping up their own practices, although on the whole he thinks them unnecessary and a source of possible danger. But from the period of his letters onwards various types of problems arise. (a) There is *sheer rivalry* in the proclamation of the gospel. This Paul was prepared to put up with, but he drew the line when his own mission and apostolate were called in question.

(b) There was *unethical behaviour*, which Paul condemned, especially if it arose from false teaching. (c) There was the possibility of Christians being *mised* as a result of pagan ideas, through lack of Christian instruction, through false deductions from the gospel. (d) There was the possibility of *teaching which differed from Paul's understanding* of the gospel. This included Judaizing, which jeopardized faith in Christ, and antinomianism, which went contrary to Paul's understanding of the nature of the new life in Christ. There may have been erroneous views of the work of the Spirit, especially in relation to spiritual gifts, and false views of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Another Jesus, another gospel, another Spirit - these three phrases sum up the dangers faced by Paul. This was how he saw heresy. Similar dangers are found in the other New Testament writings.

3. *Paul's method* of treatment varied. Sometimes he was simply warning his churches against possible influences, and we do not learn much about the character of the problems faced. At other times, the error seems to have got a firmer hold on the church. Then there may be a full-scale argument to show its falsity, as in Galatians, or a restatement of doctrine, as in Colossians. There is appeal to the nature of Christian experience, to the gospel as he preached it, and as he had received it, and to his own calling. Those who persist in false teaching may be removed from fellowship in the church. The church needs to appoint teachers who will stand firmly in the succession of sound doctrine and themselves be apt to teach others.

Now if this survey is sound, it shows that certain people in the first century, namely the writers of the New Testament, were conscious of the existence of opinions different from their own in the church, that they wrote and used other means to state or show that they were incompatible with the gospel which they believed themselves to have inherited,

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and that certain groups of people were regarded by them as deviationists and were excluded from the church or took themselves off to form their own groups. And this in my opinion is evidence that Bauer's thesis does not work when it is applied to the first century. Smalley's version of it with regard to John cannot be applied to the rest of the New Testament, and I am doubtful whether it is true even of John. For Bauer said in effect that there was considerable variety of belief in the early church, and that what later came to be regarded as orthodoxy was not conscious of being such at first, nor were there clear boundaries between different sorts of Christian belief, nor was what later came to be regarded as orthodox necessarily first on the ground. But the only valid point in this is that *there was variety of belief in the first century*. The New Testament writers one and all regard themselves as upholders of the truth of the gospel, and

they often see quite clearly where the lines of what is compatible with the gospel and what is not compatible are to be drawn. And while it is possible that in some places the beginnings of Christianity came from people later regarded as heretical, it is not the case that orthodoxy was a later development.

6. Areas for further exploration

What factors might be placed over against this conclusion?

I. Basically, there is the question whether the New Testament writers were in fact in such agreement that any one of them would have recognized any other as 'sound in the faith'. Did James think that Paul was sound? If Paul had read Revelation, would he have agreed with it? Did John write his Gospel because he thought the others needed correction or even supersession, and did any of the other Gospel writers think the same way? These questions cannot be given a facile answer in the brief space left at my disposal, but I make bold to say that they would have recognized one another as brothers and colleagues in the defence of the gospel.

2. What were the groups criticized by the New Testament writers as heretical really like? Until a sort of first century Nag Hammadi library comes to light, this question cannot be fully answered. But it may be worth noting that when the Nag Hammadi library was first discovered, H. Chadwick expressed his opinion that it would not cause any major alteration in our assessment of the nature of Gnosticism as we had learned it from the church fathers who wrote against it. The same may well be true of the New Testament. Thus I find no reason to doubt that Paul was justified in his accusations of immorality against those who rejected his gospel. Did such people regard themselves as the defenders of truth? We have seen that some did, but this reinforces the view that the idea of orthodoxy was prevalent in the first century.

3. How did such groups regard persons like Paul or John? Were they regarded as heretical, if so, by whom? and in such cases how do we decide which was right? Was Diotrephes the defender of 'orthodoxy' against the Elder? The church's answer was to canonize Paul and John, and not their opponents. But how did the situation seem during their period of ministry? One answer is that Paul evidently had some respect for the Jerusalem church, and he wanted to have its assurance that he was not, as he puts it, running in vain. But he was accepted by it, and could build on that fact. It was to the apostles that appeal was made. And if a Peter or Barnabas could deviate from Paul on occasion, it was only temporary and an inevitable risk during the growing period. There must undoubtedly have been a growing period during which the situation was flexible and ideas were not hard and fast, but some basic essentials were probably settled quite early, certainly earlier than Bauer suggests.

4. Perhaps the biggest problem concerns the relations between the various groups which lie behind the New Testament writers. There is the problem of the relation between Hebrews and Hellenists in the Jerusalem church, and the whole question of Jewish-orientated and Gentile-orientated types of Christians. This has been stressed by U. Wilckens in an essay discussing the place of Jesus-traditions in the church; he suggests that there were two communities, one passing on these traditions, and the other comparatively unaffected by them; the one orientated to the earthly Jesus, the other to the exalted Christ. These were later brought together, but at first there were in effect two quite different types of Christianity.²⁴

Somewhat similar is the attempt of H. Koester to show that there were four different types of Gospel material in the early church, effecting different christologies. These were (1) the collection of *sayings of Jesus*, assembled by those who thought that the essence of Christianity was to perpetuate the teaching of Jesus as a teacher of wisdom. (2) The *aretalogy*, presenting

Jesus as a divine man who performed supernatural actions. (3) The *revelation*, in which the risen Jesus gives esoteric instruction to his disciples. (4) The *kerygma* of the death and resurrection of Jesus

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historicized into a narrative form. Our canonical Gospels represent to some extent corrections of these earlier outlooks - a feature we have already noticed in the case of Mark.²⁵

The question would then be how far these different points of view represented varieties of Christian belief, and how far they required the rejection of other points of view as heretical. But a more basic question would be how far this is a correct analysis of the position in the early church, and I would suggest that Koester's view is in fact a misleading description of the situation. This point cannot be developed in detail here. But if Koester's view contains elements of truth, it poses questions for us.

These four problems indicate that I have not provided all the answers to the historical questions posed by orthodoxy and heresy in New Testament times. None of them, however, is sufficient in my opinion to call in question my basic thesis, namely that the first-century church was conscious of the difference between orthodoxy and heresy, and that from an early date there was a body of belief which could be regarded as apostolic and orthodox.

7. The theological consequences

I have left myself no space to discuss the theological and contemporary significance of the material we have been discussing. It must suffice simply to pose some questions that arise.

1. We have travelled thus far without raising the basic question of what we are talking about. *What in fact is heresy?* It is dangerous to work with undefined terms. W. Bauer at one point speaks of a heretic as 'a fellow Christian concerning whom one is convinced that his divergent stance with regard to the faith bars him from the path of salvation.'²⁶ That is perhaps an extreme definition. At the opposite extreme there have been those who regard any deviation from their particular brand of Christianity as heresy. I can think of one distinguished writer on baptism who certainly came near to thinking that anybody who had doubts about the validity of infant baptism ought not to be a candidate for the ministry in his particular denomination. Somewhere in between these extremes there may be the idea of heresy as teaching which is regarded as contrary to the basic confession of the church in some central point or points, such that the confession is endangered by it.

2. A second question concerns *the rise of heresy*. H. Koester suggests that it arises from two possible dangers: either the time-bound historical shaping of the Christian revelation was absolutized and the quality of revelation was credited to a temporary form, or as a result of the consciousness that the revelation had a supra-historical quality, the link with its historical origin was surrendered, and foreign ideas were able to claim admission.²⁷ One might see Judaizing as an example of the first of these dangers and Gnosticizing as an example of the second. The question then arises as to whether heresies in general can be subsumed most fruitfully under these two headings.

3. The early church took up a *stance against heresy*, and in some cases acted against heretics. Does this provide a pattern for the church today to follow? In a brief article written at the time of the Pike controversy, J. Macquarrie suggested that the category of heresy was no longer

applicable in the church today. Christianity can exist in a variety of forms, and the lines between orthodoxy and heresy cannot be drawn sharply. Excommunication for heresy is no longer a viable possibility, especially when today's heresy may become tomorrow's orthodoxy.²⁸

This approach certainly suggests the need for caution, but it may well be that it does not take the New Testament seriously enough. For the essence of heresy is that it presents itself as a form of the real thing, as distinct from, say, an atheistic position which is confessedly anti-Christian, and therefore it presents the greater danger to the faith since, from the point of view of orthodoxy, error is masquerading as truth. A church which takes its confession seriously must surely be prepared to speak out against what it believes to be error, and if necessary to discipline those who profess to uphold its confession while effectively denying or contradicting it. A confessional church has a right and necessity to do so. Whether the same thing is possible in a non-confessional church may be more difficult to argue; perhaps indeed it is an argument against a non-confessional church that it is unable to apply the categories of orthodoxy and heresy.²⁹

References

¹ W. Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit and Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (Tübingen, 1934); reprinted 1964); Eng. tr.: *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (London, 1972).

² From W. Bauer's own summary statement of his thesis in his *Aufsätze and kleine Schriften* (ed. G. Strecker, Tübingen, 1967), pp. 229-233 (my translation).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, II (London, 1955), p. 135.

⁵ G. Strecker, 'On the Problem of Jewish Christianity', In W. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, pp. 241-285.

⁶ S. S. Smalley, 'Diversity and Development In John', *NTS* 17 (1970.1971), pp. 276-292, quotation from p. 279.

⁷ For a survey of reactions to Bauer's thesis, see the appendix to his book by G. Strecker and R. A. Kraft (*op. cit.*, pp. 286-316). More recent discussions include: H.-D. Altendorf, 'Zum Stichwort: Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum', *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 80 (1969), pp. 61-74; M. Elze, 'Häresie und Einheit der Kirche im 2. Jahrhundert', *ZTK* 71 (1974), pp. 389-409; A. I. C. Heron, 'The Interpretation of I. Clement in Walter Bauer's "Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei in ältesten Christentum"', *Ekklesiastikos Pharos*, IV (1973) (NE), pp.517-545.

⁸ H. Koester and J. M. Robinson, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1971).

⁹ A. M. Hunter, *The Unity of the New Testament* (London, 1943).

¹⁰ E. F. Scott, *The Varieties of New Testament Religion* (New York, 1946).

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 305.

¹² Since most scholars hold that the Pastoral Epistles are post-Pauline and are some of the latest

writings in the NT, our discussion assumes that view for the sake of the argument. In other words, our discussion is intended to show that even on the assumption of a late date for the Epistles they testify to the existence of a clear distinction between orthodoxy and heresy at the end of the first century. Our point, therefore, does not depend on acceptance of a conservative view of the authorship and date of the Epistles, although conservative scholars who believe that there are good grounds for substituting 'Paul' for 'the writer' in the text will be able to claim that there was a concern for right doctrine at an earlier date than most critical scholars would allow.

¹³ The date assigned by W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (London, 1966), p. 272, is typical of recent study. For arguments in favour of Pauline authorship see D. Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles* (London, 1957); J. N. D. Kelly, *The Pastoral Epistles* (London, 1963).

¹⁴ E. Käsemann, 'Ketzer und Zeuge', *ZTK* 48 (1951), pp.292-311.

¹⁵ M. D. Hooker, 'Were there false teachers in Colossae?', in B. Lindars and S. S. Smalley (eds.), *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 315- 331.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 329.

¹⁷ C. H. Talbert, *Luke and the Gnostics* (Nashville, 1966).

¹⁸ E. Schweizer, 'Observance of the Law and Charismatic Activity in Matthew', *NTS* 16 (1969-1970), pp. 213-230.

¹⁹ T. J. Weeden, *Mark-Traditions In Conflict* (Philadelphia, 1971).

²⁰ N. Perrin, *A Modern Pilgrimage In New Testament Christology* (Philadelphia, 1974), pp. 84-93.

²¹ R. P. Martin, *Mark: Evangelist and Theologian* (Exeter, 1972).

²² On this view John was correcting the viewpoint of a more naive 'signs source' which he has incorporated in his Gospel.

²³ W. C. van Unnik, 'Die Apostelgeschichte und die Häresien', *ZNW* 58 (1967), pp. 240-246.

²⁴ U. Wilckens, 'Jesusüberlieferung und Christuskerygma - zwei Wege urehristlicher Überlieferungsgeschichte', *Theologia Viatorum* 10 (1965-1966), pp. 310-339.

²⁵ H. Koester, 'One Jesus and Four Primitive Gospels', *HTR* 61 (1968), pp. 203-247; reprinted in H. Koester and J. M. Robinson, *op. cit.*

²⁶ W. Bauer, *op. cit.*, pp. 234f.

²⁷ H. Koester, 'The Theological Aspects of Primitive Christian Heresy', in J. M. Robinson (ed.), *The Future of our Religious Past* (London, 1971). pp. 65-83.

²⁸ J. Macquarrie, *Thinking about God* (London, 1975), pp. 44-45.

²⁹ For a survey of heresy in the New Testament see H. Koester 'Häretiker im Urchristentum', in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, III 3, cols 17-21.