WHAT IS THE HERESY OF ORTHODOXY?

“A comprehensive critique of the Bauer–Ehrman thesis that the earliest form of Christianity was pluralistic, that there were multiple Christianities, and that heresy was prior to orthodoxy. The Heresy of Orthodoxy at every turn makes a convincing case that the Bauer–Ehrman thesis is dead wrong.”

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The HERESY OF ORTHODOXY

HOW CONTEMPORARY CULTURE’S FASCINATION with DIVERSITY HAS RESHAPED OUR UNDERSTANDING of EARLY CHRISTIANITY

ANDREAS J. KÖSTENBERGER

MICHAEL J. KRUGER

FOREWORD BY I. HOWARD MARSHALL
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Old heresies and arguments against Christianity have a habit of reappearing long after they have been thought dead. Somebody has commented that most objections to the faith were voiced by Celsus (who was relentlessly answered by Origen). Nevertheless, there is a sufficient appearance of plausibility in some of them to justify their being taken off the shelf, dusted down, and given a makeover. When this happens, they need fresh examination to save a new generation of readers from being taken in by them.

Such is the case with the thesis of the German lexicographer Walter Bauer, who single-handedly read the entire corpus of ancient Greek literature in order to produce his magnificent Lexicon to the New Testament. Its worth is entirely independent of the fact that its compiler was in some respects a radical critic who claimed on the basis of his researches into second-century Christianity that there was no common set of “orthodox” beliefs in the various Christian centers but rather a set of disparate theologies, out of which the strongest (associated with Rome) assumed the dominant position and portrayed itself as true, or “orthodox.”

At first there were indeed no concepts of orthodoxy and heresy, and this division was late in being consciously developed. Bauer claimed (without much argument) that this situation could be traced back into the New Testament period. His 1934 monograph defending his case had little influence in the English-speaking world until its translation in 1971. Various writers showed it to be flawed in its analysis of the early churches and their theology and mistaken in assuming that the New Testament writers did not
know the difference between orthodoxy and heresy. Now it has undergone resuscitation (if not resurrection) largely through the popular writings of Bart Ehrman, who brings in the new evidence for many varied forms of early Christianity in Gnostic documents and adds his own contribution by pointing to the many variations in the manuscripts of the New Testament that he sees as evidence of differences in doctrine.

The new presentation of the Bauer hypothesis needs a fresh dissection lest readers of it be tempted to think that it demands credence. The authors of this volume set out the arguments on both sides with fairness coupled with critical examination. They show that Bauer’s original case has been demolished brick by brick by other competent scholars. They argue that the existence of various Christian splinter groups in no way shows that there was a farrago of different theologies from which people were at liberty to pick and choose. They re-present the incontrovertible evidence that the distinctions between truth and falsity and between orthodoxy and heresy were clearly made within the New Testament, and they argue that the New Testament writings are in basic agreement with one another in their theologies. They show how the concept of conformity to Scripture was an innate characteristic of a covenantal theology. And they rout the appeal to variations in New Testament manuscripts as evidence for theological differences in the early church.

The authors write as adherents of what would probably be identified as an evangelical Christianity that maintains a belief in the divine inspiration of Scripture, but, so far as I can see, their arguments are not dependent on this belief and rest on solid evidence and reasonable arguments, so that their case is one that should be compelling to those who may not share their theological position. They present their arguments clearly and simply, so that, although this book is based on wide and accurate scholarship, it should be widely accessible to readers who want to know about the themes they address.

I am grateful for this careful and courteous assessment of the issues at stake and commend it most warmly to all who want to know more about the origins of Christian practice and theology.

—I. Howard Marshall
Emeritus Professor of New Testament Exegesis,
University of Aberdeen, Scotland

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The Contemporary Battle to Recast the Origins of the New Testament and Early Christianity

What is truth? In a world in which at times right seems wrong—or even worse, where the lines between right and wrong are blurred to the point that we are no longer sure if there even is such a thing as right and wrong—Pilate’s question to Jesus takes on new urgency. Instead, all truth, including morality, becomes perspectival and subjective, a matter of nothing but personal preference and taste. In such a world, like in the days of the judges, everyone does what is right in his or her own eyes, but unlike in the days of the judges, this is not meant as an indictment but celebrated as the ultimate expression of truly enlightened humanity. All is fluid, doctrine is dead, and diversity reigns. Not only in restaurants and shopping malls, but even in churches and houses of worship, what people are looking for is a variety of options, and if they don’t like what they see, they take their business—or worship—elsewhere. Consumers control which products are made, children are catered to by parents, students determine what is taught in our schools and universities, and no one should tell anyone else what to do—or at least not acknowledge that they do. We live in an age that prides

1See Andreas J. Köstenberger, ed., Whatever Happened to Truth? (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005).
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itself on its independence, rejection of authority, and embrace of pluralism. Truth is dead; long live diversity!

In this topsy-turvy world of pluralism and postmodernity, where reason has been replaced as the arbiter of truth by perspectivalism and the unfettered and untouchable authority of personal experience, conventional notions are turned on their head. What used to be regarded as heresy is the new orthodoxy of the day, and the only heresy that remains is orthodoxy itself. “The Heresy of Orthodoxy” is more than a catchy title or a ploy concocted to entice potential readers to buy this book. It is an epithet that aptly captures the prevailing spirit of the age whose tentacles are currently engulfing the Christian faith in a deadly embrace, aiming to subvert the movement at its very core. The new orthodoxy—the “gospel” of diversity—challenges head-on the claim that Jesus and the early Christians taught a unified message that they thought was absolutely true and its denials absolutely false. Instead, advocates of religious diversity such as Walter Bauer and Bart Ehrman argue not only that contemporary diversity is good and historic Christianity unduly narrow, but that the very notion of orthodoxy is a later fabrication not true to the convictions of Jesus and the first Christians themselves.

In the first century, claim Bauer, Ehrman, and other adherents to the “diversity” doctrine, there was no such thing as “Christianity” (in the singular), but only Christianities (in the plural), different versions of belief, all of which claimed to be “Christian” with equal legitimacy. The traditional version of Christianity that later came to be known as orthodoxy is but the form of Christianity espoused by the church in Rome, which emerged as the ecclesiastical victor in the power struggles waged during the second through the fourth centuries. What this means for us today, then, is that we must try to get back to the more pristine notion of diversity that prevailed in the first century before ecclesiastical and political power squelched and brutally extinguished the fragile notion that diversity—previously known as “heresy”—is the only orthodoxy there is.

Indeed, the “new orthodoxy” has turned conventional thinking upside down. In this book, we endeavor to take you on a journey on which we will explore such questions as: Who picked the books of the Bible, and why? Did the ancient scribes who copied the biblical manuscripts change the Christian story? Was the New Testament changed along the way, so that we can no longer know what the original authors of Scripture wrote? In addressing these questions, we will take our point of departure from a German scholar whose name you may never have heard but who has perhaps done more to

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pave the way for the new orthodoxy than anyone else: Walter Bauer. In his work Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity, Bauer stated what is now commonly known as the “Bauer thesis”: the view that close study of the major urban centers at the end of the first and early second centuries reveals that early Christianity was characterized by significant doctrinal diversity, so that there was no “orthodoxy” or “heresy” at the inception of Christianity but only diversity—heresy preceded orthodoxy.

The implications of Bauer’s thesis, picked up by Bart Ehrman and others, are somewhat complex, which requires that we take up his argument in three separate but interrelated parts. Part 1 of this volume is devoted to the investigation of “The Heresy of Orthodoxy: Pluralism and the Origins of the New Testament.” In chapter 1, we will look at the origin and influence of the Bauer-Ehrman thesis, including its appropriation and critique by others. Chapter 2 examines Bauer’s geographical argument for the precedence of early diversity in the Christian movement and considers patristic evidence for early orthodoxy and heresy, and chapter 3 turns to an area of investigation that Bauer surprisingly neglected—the New Testament data itself. How diverse was early Christianity, and did heresy in fact precede orthodoxy? These are the questions that will occupy us in the first part of the book as we explore the larger paradigmatic questions raised by the Bauer-Ehrman proposal.

Part 2, “Picking the Books: Tracing the Development of the New Testament Canon,” will take up the related question of the Christian canon, the collection of divinely inspired books. Ehrman and other advocates of the Bauer thesis claim that with regard to the canon, too, early diversity prevailed, and the canon likewise was but a late imposition of the Roman church’s view onto the rest of Christendom. Is this an accurate representation of how the canon came to be? Or do Ehrman and other diversity advocates have their own ax to grind and seek to impose their agenda onto the larger culture? This will involve a discussion of other alleged candidates for inclusion in the Christian Scriptures such as apocryphal gospels, letters, and other writings. Are there indeed “lost Christianities” and “lost Scriptures” that, if rediscovered, could reveal to us “the faiths we never knew,” as Ehrman contends?

Part 3, finally, “Changing the Story: Manuscripts, Scribes, and Textual Transmission,” addresses another fascinating topic: whether the “keepers of the text,” ancient scribes and copyists, actually “tampered with the text,” that is, changed the New Testament to conform it to their own beliefs and preferences. Again, this is what Ehrman alleges, in an effort to show that
even if we wanted to know what first-century orthodoxy was—though, of course, Ehrman himself, as a devoted follower of Walter Bauer, believes there was no such thing—we would not be able to do so because the original text is now irretrievably lost. After all, have not the autographs (the original copies of Scripture) perished? How, then, can Christians today claim that they have the inspired text? This, too, is a vital question that strikes at the very core of the Christian faith and must therefore command our utmost attention.

As the remainder of this volume will make clear, as scholars, we believe that Bauer, Ehrman, and others are profoundly mistaken in their reconstruction of early Christianity. But this is not the primary reason why we wrote this book. The main reason why we feel so strongly about this issue is that the scholarly squabbles about second-century geographical expressions of Christianity, the formation of the canon, and the preservation of the text of Scripture are part of a larger battle that is raging today over the nature and origins of Christianity. This battle, in turn, we are convinced, is driven by forces that seek to discredit the biblical message about Jesus, the Lord and Messiah and Son of God, and the absolute truth claims of Christianity. The stakes in this battle are high indeed.

Finally, for those who are interested in the history of thought and in the way in which paradigms serve as a controlling framework for how we view the world, this book has yet another intriguing contribution to make. The question addressed by the Bauer-Ehrman thesis serves as a case study for how an idea is born, how and why it is appropriated by some and rejected by others, and how a paradigm attains the compelling influence over people who are largely unacquainted with the specific issues it entails. As Darrell Bock has recently argued, and as even Bart Ehrman has conceded, Bauer’s thesis has been largely discredited in the details, but, miraculously, the corpse still lives—in fact, it seems stronger than ever! What is the secret of this larger-than-life persona that transcends factual arguments based on the available evidence? We believe it is that diversity, the “gospel” of our culture, has now assumed the mantle of compelling truth—and this “truth” must not be bothered by the pesky, obstreperous details of patient, painstaking research, because in the end, the debate is not about the details but about the larger paradigm—diversity.

As in any such book, we are indebted to those who helped make it possible. In the first place, these are our wives, Marny and Melissa, and our children. We also want to acknowledge the support of our respective institutions, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and Reformed
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Theological Seminary, and express appreciation to the wonderful people at Crossway for their expert handling of the manuscript. Thanks are also due Keith Campbell for his competent research assistance in preparing chapters 1 through 3. Finally, we were grateful to be able to build on the capable work of others before us who have seen the many flaws in the Bauer-Ehrman thesis, including Darrell Bock, Paul Trebilco, Jeffrey Bingham, Craig Blaising, Thomas Robinson, and I. Howard Marshall. It is our sincere hope that this volume will make a small contribution toward a defense of the “faith once for all delivered to the saints” in our generation. Soli Deo gloria.
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