Orthodoxy and Heresy in Second-Century Rome*

Einar Thomassen
University of Bergen, Norway

The Non-Exclusion of Heretics

Sometime in the late 130s, Valentinus came to Rome. From information given by Irenaeus, it can be calculated that the founder of "Valentinianism" stayed in the imperial capital for more than fifteen years, maybe for as long as twenty-five or thirty years.[1] At that time Justin Martyr also lived in Rome, and indeed Justin mentions "the Valentinians" once, in his *Dialogue with Trypho* (35.6), composed around 155–160.[2] Justin's testimony suggests that during his years in Rome, Valentinus was active as a Christian leader.

Justin does not like the Valentinians. He mentions that group, along with the Marcionites, Basilideans, and Satornilians, as examples of αἱρέσεις—"heresies" or "heretical groups." A generation later, the Valentinians were to become the main target of Irenaeus's *Adversus haereses.* Aside from these individual literary denunciations by Justin and Irenaeus, however, there is no reliable evidence that Valentinus or the Valentinians were ever condemned by anything resembling an office of ecclesiastical authority in Rome.

*This article is the revised text of a lecture given at Harvard Divinity School on 3 April 2000. I am thankful for the comments and suggestions received on that occasion. All dates are C.E.

[1]Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.4.3. The time of Valentinus's presence in Rome is estimated on the basis of the generally accepted (i.e., Harnack's) dates for the three "episcopates" mentioned by Irenaeus. As will become clear in the course of this article, however, the idea of a succession of Roman bishops at this time is an anachronistic fiction. See also, e.g., Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (trans. Michael Steinhauser; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 404–6. The dates for Valentinus can therefore be taken only as a rough indication.

[2]The date of *Dial.* can be inferred from the fact that it must be later than Justin's *First Apology,* which is quoted in *Dial.* 120.6, and which can be dated on the basis of internal evidence to ca. 150–155; see, e.g., Adolf von Harnack, *Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur bis Eusebius* (2 vols. in 4; 2d ed.; Leipzig: Hinrich, 1958) 2/1:275–82, 289–90; and Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus,* 260.

HTR 97:3 (2004) 241–56

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000690 Published online by Cambridge University Press

What weight or authority, then, should be assigned to Justin's condemnation of the Valentinians? There is no evidence that Justin, a freelance philosopher with no official ecclesiastical position, had any significant influence within Christian circles in Rome. On the contrary, evidence for his relative insignificance is provided by the *Acts of Justin,* which offers, it is generally assumed, a fairly reliable account of the court proceedings that were to lead to Justin's martyrdom. Interrogated by the city prefect, Justin modestly affirmed that, "I have lived above the bath of Myrtinus (?), . . . and I have known no other meeting place. Whoever wished to come to my dwellings was welcome to do so, and I would give him the word of Truth."[3] Justin, it seems, was a relatively withdrawn philosopher whose contacts with fellow Christians in the city were not extensive.[4] He can hardly, therefore, be regarded as a spokesman for the views of "the church"—however we wish to understand the term "church" in this context. Perhaps Justin does not even express a widespread opinion when he condemns a certain group for being heretical, false Christians, "with whom we have nothing in common" (ὧν οὐδενὶ κοινωνοῦμεν, *Dial.* 35:5).

The surprising fact is rather that we have no evidence suggesting that Justin—either the man himself, with his expertise and rhetorical skills, or his writings, which included a compendium (*Syntagma*), now lost, treating all known heresies—was ever called upon in Rome to combat doctrinal deviations. Why did the church not enlist Justin in the struggle against the Valentinians and other heretics? Was it, perhaps, because the leaders of the church, unlike Justin, did not consider them heretics at all?

According to the later heresiologists, Valentinus was one of the two great heretics who were active in Rome around the middle of the second century. The other was, of course, Marcion. But in Marcion's case, we know for a fact that an actual split occurred. And what is most interesting about this split is that Marcion himself caused it.[5] He resigned from the church in protest; he was not excluded from that body.

Epiphanius (probably using Hippolytus's lost *Syntagma*) offers the most detailed account of what happened. Marcion was in Rome, urging his message of the true Christian faith. Christianity, he insisted, is a new religion, different from both Judaism and paganism. The god revealed by Jesus Christ is distinct from, and infinitely more elevated than, the creator and ruler of the world worshipped by the old religions. The god of the Christians, as described in the Gospels and in the letters of Paul, must not be confused with the aggressive and vindictive deity of the Jewish scriptures. These scriptures have, in consequence, no relevance for

[3]*Acta Iustini,* 3 (trans. H. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972] 44–45).

[4]See Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus,* 376, 390–91.

[5]See Gerd Lüdemann, "Zur Geschichte des ältesten Christentums in Rom," *ZNW* 70 (1979) 86–114, esp. 95–96; and Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus,* 392–93.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000690 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the Christians. Instead, the Christians must define a scriptural canon of their own. Marcion proposed that it include only an edited version of the Gospel of Luke and the letters of Paul. In the summer of 144, he invited the "presbyters and teachers" of the capital to a debate whose topic would be the interpretation of Luke 5:36–37, on not filling new wineskins with old wine.[6] Marcion failed, however, to convince the assembled Christian leaders, and the meeting ended with Marcion breaking his ties with them. The two hundred thousand sesterces he had previously donated to the Christians in Rome (Marcion was a wealthy ship owner from Pontos) were returned to him. He then left to found a church organization of his own.[7]

Thus Marcion, like Valentinus, provides no example of the condemnation of a heretic by the leadership of a church. Marcion's situation is quite the opposite of that of an expelled heretic, for it is he who refused to accept his opponents as true Christians.

The Confusion of Tertullian

A number of traditions nevertheless describe a struggle against heresy in Rome around the middle of the second century. Yet these traditions are all quite vague, and even conflicting. Thus Irenaeus claims that during his visit to Rome, Polycarp of Smyrna refuted and converted Marcionites, Valentinians, and other Gnostics. This took place during the time of bishop Anicet, he says—i.e., between 155 and 166 (*Haer.* 3.3.4). The historical accuracy of this report may be passed over here. The most remarkable thing about it is that Irenaeus indirectly concedes that an outsider was needed to combat heresy in Rome. He mentions nothing of any actions taken by the local leadership—in spite of the well-known fact that Irenaeus was intimately familiar with the traditions of Roman Christianity.

Next, Tertullian asserts in his *De Praescriptione Haereticorum,* written around the year 200, that Marcion and Valentinus were both repeatedly thrown out of the church (*semel et iterum eiecti*) because of their unbridled curiosity (30.2). The context clearly shows that this testimony relates primarily to Marcion, while the name of Valentinus has been added only by way of the conventional association of the two arch-heretics.[8] Tertullian's assertion that Marcion was "thrown out" strikingly disagrees with the tradition preserved in Epiphanius that Marcion himself cut his ties with the presbyters of Rome.

[6]Alternatively, Luke 6:43 may have been the text invoked; see Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott* (2d ed.; Leipzig: Hinrich, 1924; repr., Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996) 25*.

[7]Epiphanius, *Pan.* 42.1–2. For the date: Tertullian, *Marc.* 1.19, with Harnack's analysis in his *Geschichte,* 2/1:297–99, 306–7, and his *Marcion,* 19*–20*. For the two hundred thousand sesterces: Tertullian, *Praescr.* 30; and *Marc.* 4.4. For the source criticism in general, see Harnack, *Marcion,* 16*–28*; and Lüdemann, "Zur Geschichte," 96 n. 28.

[8]Ibid., 93–97.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000690 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Moreover, a few years later, Tertullian contradicts his previous account. In *De carne Christi* (1.3), he refers to Valentinus as Marcion's *condiscipulus et condesertor*, a formulation that implies that Valentinus and Marcion left the church on their own accord. Further, in his *Adversus Valentinianos* (4.1), Tertullian tells the following story about Valentinus: He was an eloquent and gifted Christian teacher who aspired to become bishop of Rome. Another candidate was elected, however, and Valentinus then left the church and became a heretic—in an act of revenge, as it were. That this story is a *topos* found in other contexts, and thus unreliable, was pointed out long ago.[9] Finally, in the same chapter of that work, Tertullian asserts that later Valentinians developed theories that were quite different from the ones taught by Valentinus; here Tertullian seems to imply that Valentinus himself did not teach the particular type of heretical doctrine that had come to be associated with Valentinianism at the time of Tertullian.[10]

Tertullian's contradictions suggest that he did not possess any clear information that Valentinus had been excommunicated, or even condemned, by the Christian leadership in Rome. On the contrary, Tertullian's shifting statements—Valentinus himself left the church, he did not reveal his heretical views until a later stage in his career, it was only among Valentinus's students that Valentinianism became clearly heretical—may have been conjectures made in the absence of reliable data. If the Roman church failed to expel Valentinus, Tertullian would have reasoned, then either Valentinus himself left the Christian community, or his heresy became apparent only at a later point in time.

During Tertullian's own lifetime (ca. 160–ca. 225), it is certain that expulsion from the church was possible. The earliest evidence is Eusebius's text of a letter sent by the "Gallic martyrs" to bishop Eleutheros in Rome. The letter urges the Roman bishop to be reconciled with a group of Montanists in the capital (*Hist. eccl.* 5.3–4). Some sort of declared schism had evidently divided Eleutheros and the Montanists. It must have occurred after 175, which is approximately when Eleutheros became bishop.

A few years later, the Montanists were disowned once more by the bishop of Rome—probably Eleutheros's successor, Victor (189–199). This happened, however, only after Praxeas, himself a Modalist, had led a campaign against them (Tertullian, *Prax.* 1). We know that Victor wanted to excommunicate certain adherents of the Quartodeciman Easter celebration practice, represented in Rome by one Blastus and his circle.[11] He is said to have convened a synod to bring about the expulsion, while Irenaeus tried to prevent it. But we do not know how this affair ended; in any case the Quartodecimans were considered heretics by all

[9]See Karlmann Beyschlag, "Kallist und Hippolyt," *TZ* 20 (1964) 103–24; Lüdemann, "Zur Geschichte," 92–93; and Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus,* 391 n. 17.

[10]Thus Christoph Markschies, *Valentinus Gnosticus? Untersuchungen zur valentinianischen Gnosis mit einem Kommentar zu den Fragmenten Valentins* (WUNT 65; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992) 305–11.

[11]Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.15; 20.1; 23–24; and Pseudo-Tertullian, *Adv. Omn. Haer.* 8.1.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000690 Published online by Cambridge University Press

later heresiologists.[12] Further, Eusebius reports that Victor renounced communion (ἀπεκήρυξε τῆς κοινωνίας) with Theodotus "the shoemaker" because of his deviant theological views: Theodotus taught an adoptionist form of Christology (*Hist. eccl.* 5.28). The Theodotians were to live on as a separate church.[13] Finally, Victor took action against an alleged Valentinian, a man called Florinus, by removing his authorization as a presbyter (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.15). This nevertheless happened only after Irenaeus had written to Victor to warn him that Florinus was a dangerous heretic.[14] This is, as far as we know, the first time that Valentinianism was formally denounced as heretical by the church leadership in Rome, and it occurred sometime in the 190s.

In the days of Tertullian, therefore, it might be expected that a central ecclesiastical authority in Rome—i.e., the bishop—would intervene against what he regarded as doctrinal deviation by announcing excommunication, or at least condemnation. Tertullian's confused and conflicting reports about Valentinus, however, indicate that this was not the case around the middle of the second century.

Why Was Valentinus Not Condemned?

Three different explanations could account for the failure of Roman church leadership to condemn Valentinus as a heretic. The first possibility is that Valentinus was himself not a Valentinian; that is, he did not hold or express the doctrines that the later heresiologists describe as characteristically Valentinian. This is one of the explanations offered by Tertullian. It is, moreover, one that has been resurrected more recently, in the comprehensive monograph by Christoph Markschies, *Valentinus Gnosticus?*.[15] Against this hypothesis stands the fact that already in the 150s, Justin clearly perceived the Valentinians as heretics. Also, no break with the Valentinians was declared at a later time, when their doctrines must have been clearly formulated; all we have in this respect is Victor's condemnation in the 190s of an individual whom Irenaeus had accused of being a Valentinian. It is doubtful, too, one may add, that Florinus was a card-carrying, organized Valentinian, i.e., a member of a Valentinian congregation.[16]

The second possibility is that the Valentinians were tolerated as members of the church. "Tolerance" in this context can be given a strong as well as a weak interpretation—it can imply either an active recognition or a passive acceptance of doctrinal diversity. A solution along these lines has been suggested by Gerd Lüdemann, in an article from 1979.[17] He imagines that Valentinus did not suffer antagonism in Rome,

[12]Hippolytus, *Haer.* 8.18; and Epiphanius, *Pan.* 50.1.

[13]See Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus,* 344–48.

[14]Iren. Syr. frag. 28 (ed. Harvey II, 457).

[15]Markschies, *Valentinus Gnosticus?*.

[16]It is beyond the scope of the present paper to justify this assertion, which in my view follows necessarily from a study of the material collected by Anton Baumstark, "Die Lehre des römischen Presbyters Florinus," *ZNW* 13 (1912) 306–19.

[17]Lüdemann, "Zur Geschichte."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000690 Published online by Cambridge University Press

but enjoyed the status of an admired teacher within "the Christian community" there.[18] The problem with this hypothesis is that our sources are silent. While we have no clear evidence of a condemnation of Valentinus, neither do we find any explicit indication that he and his followers were generally accepted. In addition, it is still necessary to explain the fact that even later, in the days of Tertullian, when the fronts had crystallized and doctrinal positions were clear, we find no trace of a declared break between the Roman church and the Valentinians as a group.

A third possible explanation is that the organizational structures among the Christians in Rome, and consequently the conditions for the exercise of power, including church discipline, underwent a change between the middle of the second century and its close. This is a hypothesis that deserves further examination.

The Organizational Structure of Roman Christianity

In his book *From Paul to Valentinus,*[19] Peter Lampe describes the "fractionation" of the early Roman Christians.[20] He points out that already in his letter to the Romans, Paul does not address a single Roman church, but a plurality of house congregations. For a long time such house congregations were all there would be, and meetings in private homes served as the only organized frame of reference for the collective identity of the worshippers. We are well into the third century before we can assume the existence of real property, including houses of worship, that was corporately owned by the Roman church and administered by the episcopate. This privatized infrastructure corresponds with a decentralized form of organization that may be discerned in the literary sources available for Rome in this period. Neither *1 Clement* in the 90s, nor the *Shepherd of Hermas* in the second quarter of the second century, nor the writings of Justin in the middle of the second century give us any reason to believe that there existed something like a central leadership for all the Christians in Rome—a supreme "bishop," for instance. Rather, these sources always speak about leaders in the plural: overseers, presbyters, or bishops.[21] Nothing indicates that a distinction of rank existed between πρεσβύτεροι and ἐπίσκοποι; bishops appear to be simply presbyters whose special duties included caring for the poor.

Naturally, there are many things we should have liked to know, but cannot, about the sociology of the Roman church in the second century. How large were the congregations, for instance? A rough answer might be that they could not easily have been larger than the number of people that would fit into the living room of a private residence—hardly more than a hundred people. How many such

[18]Ibid., esp. 96, 114.

[19]Cited in n. 1, above. The book was originally published as *Die stadtrömischen Christen in den ersten beiden Jahrhunderten* (WUNT, 2d series, 18; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1987; 2d ed., 1989). Lampe's methodology has been criticized especially by G. Schöllgen, "Probleme der frühchristlichen Sozialgeschichte: Einwände gegen Peter Lampes Buch 'Die stadtrömischen Christen in den ersten beiden Jahrhunderten,'" *JAC* 32 (1989) 23–40. Schöllgen's criticisms do not relate to the issues discussed in the present article, however.

[20]Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus,* 301–45.

[21]Ibid., 398–99.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000690 Published online by Cambridge University Press

congregations were there? This is very difficult to estimate, but it has been estimated that out of the great number of so-called *tituli*, or Roman churches that go back to private houses, some twenty may date from before Constantine. This might give us a vague idea about the number in the second century as well. Furthermore, to what extent had offices been institutionalized? How was a presbyter, a bishop, an overseer appointed? To what extent was there a division of labor between ritual, social, and administrative functions? How many officers might there be in one congregation? And, conversely, could one officer serve in, or be responsible for, several congregations at the same time?

The Christian congregations during this period may be compared with other institutions: the pagan private clubs, or *collegia*; the θίασοι of the mystery religions; and the Jewish synagogues; all took the form of independent associations with no form of central leadership or control.[22] On the other hand, we know that the Christian communities did possess certain common institutions and functions. *1 Clement,* for instance, is written on behalf of the Roman *ekklesia* as a whole. Similarly, Ignatius's letter to the Romans is addressed to something the author conceives of as unity. This suggests the existence of some kind of secretarial office, authorized to carry out correspondence on behalf of the Roman congregations as a group.[23] According to Hermas, moreover, a certain Grapte was entrusted with teaching widows and orphans in all of Rome's congregations.[24] How, then, were such persons selected or approved for their tasks, and how did Clement know what to write in his letter to the Corinthians?

Hermas appears to assume that the congregational leaders might sometimes meet in an assembly. He says, for instance, "You are to tell the overseers of the *ekklesia*" (*Vis.* 2.2.6); and, "You will read [the book] together with (or "before," μετά) the presbyters who lead the Church" (*Vis.* 2.4.3).[25] Furthermore, in 144, Marcion had already confronted an assembly of "presbyters and leaders." These indications are not very strong as evidence for the existence of a *collegium* of presbyters as an established institution. Such an institution might explain, however, how there could be a secretary able to write letters on behalf of the Roman congregations as a whole, and how Grapte came to be assigned her task as a teacher. It is also possible to imagine that such an assembly would be able to appoint candidates to the offices of presbyter, bishop, or superior. Perhaps such offices might also embrace several congregations. It is not necessarily true, as Lampe thinks, that a one-to-one correspondence obtained between congregation and presbyter, so that each congregation had one presbyter, who at the same time functioned as an *episkopos* responsible only for the poor within his own congregation.[26]

[22]For the Jewish congregations, see ibid., 431–32.

[23]See also Herm. *Vis.* 2.4.3; and Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.23.11.

[24]Herm. *Vis.* 2.4.3. See Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus,* 401; and Norbert Brox, *Der Hirt des Hermas* (Kommentar zu den Apostolischen Vätern, 7; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991) 108–9.

[25]See Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus,* 401–2; and Brox, *Hermas,* 107, 533–34.

[26]Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus,* 400.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000690 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Centralizing and Decentralizing Forces

In order to describe the situation adequately, I believe we must try to avoid thinking in static categories, be they a conglomeration of disconnected congregations or a unified and centrally led "church." More helpful is a dynamic model, in which relations among the several groups of Christians in Rome are characterized by tension between decentralizing and centralizing forces.

A range of factors may have contributed to decentralization. First, the material infrastructure of the church in Rome was composed mostly of modest private dwellings. Second, as the Christian population grew, new congregations proliferated. Third, Christianity in Rome was a religion of immigrants: it recruited people from all over the empire, persons with backgrounds in a variety of local Christian traditions. Fourth, the social and educational levels—in addition to personalities and temperaments—varied. Fifth, the Roman church may have followed existing models of decentralized religious organization, such as the private clubs of the *collegium* type, the cells of mystery religions, and the relatively autonomous Jewish synagogues.

All of these factors favored diversity. And diversity there was! Other gnostics besides Valentinus and Marcion operated in Rome in the mid-second century. As early as the 130s, a certain Cerdo was teaching that the father of the Lord Jesus Christ was not the just god of the Law and the Prophets, but a purely good god who had been previously unknown[27]—basically the same position that Marcion was later to defend so forcefully. In the 150s and 160s appears a local variant of the so-called Carpocratians, led by a woman, Marcellina; this group advocated, and practiced, an anticosmic and anomistic form of communism, and set up icons of Christ next to images of the philosophers in syncretistic fashion.[28] There is no record that any of these groups, either, were condemned in their own time. It seems, rather, that anyone who desired to do so might go ahead and preach the gospel in his or her own way, gathering a circle of adherents and carrying out ritual activities in the name of Jesus Christ, without risking sanctions from a central office of authority.

What, then, about the centralizing forces? Here, one particular factor is clearly essential. It is an ideological factor: the idea of "the church" as a unity. From the very beginning, Christians seem to have strongly held that all believers in Christ were members of a single community. The word *ekklesia* was used not only to designate an individual congregation; it also named the larger fellowship that included all believers. Already Paul uses the word this way.[29] This larger fellowship was no more than an ideal, of course, but it was an ideal that had practical implications insofar as it inspired individual communities to actively seek and maintain contact with one another, through traveling, correspondence, counseling, and exchanges of

[27]Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.27.1, 3.4.3.

[28]Ibid., 1.25, esp. 1.25.6.

[29]See, e.g., K. L. Schmidt, "Ἐκκλησία," *TDNT* 3:501–36, esp. 504–5, 506–7, 532–33; and O. Linton, "Ekklesia," *RAC* 4:906–21, esp. 912–14.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000690 Published online by Cambridge University Press

gifts. This ideal of a religious commonwealth as well as the reality of a network of congregations have no equivalent in other religions of the Late Hellenistic through Late Antique periods. The Christian *ekklesia* was an innovation in the religious sociology of antiquity.[30] It combined the social form of the Hellenistic private religious association with the Jewish idea of a chosen people, and thus created, for the first time in the history of European religion, what can be described as a religious *sect.* That is, the Christian *ekklesia* was a community in which the idea of the internal unity and fellowship of the believers is the natural corollary of the notion that these, as the "saints" and the "elect," are collectively distinct from a profane, and even impure, external "world."[31]

In light of this understanding of the *ekklesia* as a sect, it is possible to understand the concern for unanimity and the anxiety about dissension expressed above all in early Christian epistolary texts (and in the Apocalypse). It is in the epistolary texts that the term αἵρεσις first appears, as a name for undesirable divisive factions within the individual congregation. The authors of this literature also exhibit a remarkable preoccupation with correct doctrine—even if their notions of correct doctrine vary. There is, however, no direct or explicit connection between this attack on doctrinal deviations and the application of the word αἵρεσις. The word refers essentially to divisions in general—divisions *within* the community, it should be added—and not to aberrations of doctrine as such.[32] The first to establish such a connection is Justin.[33]

The idea of the unity of the church was powerful enough to motivate a desire for unity across the boundaries of the individual congregations, as well as actions to promote such unity. Only the strength of this idea can fully explain why the congregations of Rome felt a need for cooperation. And they did co-operate, as we have seen, in the form of general assemblies that appointed certain people to be in charge of correspondence, education, or charity. Congregations also had to nominate officers entrusted with common funds for the support of congregations overseas[34] or as internal relief for the poor. Another documented and concrete manifestation of the desire to express fellowship across congregational boundaries was the custom

[30]See Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) 107–10.

[31]For the theory of sects see, e.g., B. R. Wilson, *Religious Sects* (London: Widenfeld, 1973), and other publications by the same author; for an application of such theoretical description to early Christianity, see Meeks, *The First Urban Christians,* 84–107.

[32]See 1 Cor 11:19 and Gal 5:20; even in 2 Pet 2:1 the word seems to mean primarily "division," rather than "error of doctrine."

[33]See M. Elze, "Häresie und Einheit der Kirche im 2. Jahrhundert," *ZTK* 71 (1974) 389–409, esp. 394, 405–6. For a general study of the notion of heresy in Christian writers, and of Justin as its originator, see Alain Le Boulluec, *La notion d'hérésie dans la littérature grecque, II^e–III^e siècles* (2 vols.; Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1985).

[34]Dionysius of Corinth, cited in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.23.10; see also Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus,* 402–3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000690 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of sending portions of the eucharistic bread from one congregation to another.[35] Such a desire for coming together, coupled with a recognition of shared obligations, is not attested for pagan cult associations such as the mysteries of Isis or Mithras, nor, though this is perhaps more debatable, for the synagogues. None of these other religions was, in any case, evolving larger organizational structures.

We do not know, of course, how representative those so-called "presbyter conventions" may have been of the total number of Christian congregations in Rome, or how often they may have convened. Nor have we any way of knowing how widespread such customs as sending around the Eucharist to sister congregations actually were. But these are nonetheless indications that a desire for intercongregational contact and fellowship did in fact exist.

Thus, countering the decentralizing factors enumerated above is the idea that all Christians form one fellowship, a single church. In Rome, this idea motivated, as we have seen, various attempts at co-operation across congregation boundaries. Those attempts, however, also bred conflict. The *Shepherd of Hermas* complains that the presbyters and local leaders constantly disagree among themselves over issues of rank and authority.[36] Such conflicts may be interpreted as expressions of a struggle between the decentralizing and the centralizing forces. In Hermas's time, the decentralizing forces were apparently so strong that efforts to realize the ideal of the unity of the church tended to increase division rather than to reduce it. Thus an unstable situation obtained, wherein relationships fluctuated between collaboration, conflict, and resigned passivity. It was unclear who belonged within and who stood outside "the church," understood as the people with whom one co-operated or whom one regarded as fellow Christians; such notions would have varied from one group to the other, and from one point in time to the next. In this context it is quite conceivable that accusations of doctrinal deviation may have shaped conflicts,[37] but stable definitions of orthodoxy and heresy had not yet been developed.[38]

[35]Irenaeus, cited in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.24.15, etc.; see also Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus,* 385–86.

[36]*Vis.* 3.9.7–10; and *Sim.* 8.7.4–6, 9.31.6.

[37]Hermas, too, expresses himself in such terms. *Sim.* 3.7.1 speaks about those who have gone astray and are lost. *Mand.* 9 attacks false prophets; they are revealed, however, by their conduct, not by their doctrines. *Sim.* 5.7.2 warns against despising the body; this may possibly refer to some kind of gnostics. *Sim.* 8.6.5 and 9.19.2 mention hypocrites who introduce false teachings and confuse the servants of God; these may, however, still be saved if they do penance. And *Sim.* 9.22.1–2 speaks about the arrogant and foolhardy, who think they know everything but in reality are ignorant (gnostics?); these are not bad people, merely foolish, and there is still hope for them.

[38]Walter Bauer, in his seminal work *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (2d ed.; BHT 10; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1963), regarded Rome as the exception to his general thesis that "heretical" forms of Christianity predominated in the early history of the Church. In Rome, he argued, what was later to become orthodoxy was firmly established already around 100, and the Roman church subsequently managed to export its form of Christianity to communities elsewhere (see esp. chapter 10). As will be evident from the preceding discussion, we cannot accept this view of early Roman orthodoxy and uniformity. On Bauer's view, see also Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus,* 396 n. 29.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000690 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Agents of Unity: Hermas, Marcion, and Valentinus

It is possible to observe, I believe, how, in various segments of Roman Christianity in the second century, the existing diversity among Christians came to be regarded as intolerable. The tension between the forces of decentralization, expressed in the actual heterogeneity of the congregations, and the will to centralization, motivated by the idea of the unity of "the church," reached a point where it provoked reactions that took the shape of programs of reform. Three early reformers were active in Rome during the second quarter of the second century: Hermas, Marcion, and Valentinus.[39] In spite of the obvious differences between them, they all shared a desire for reform. Each of the three reacted against the current lack of unity among Christians as being contrary to the ideal of "the church."

Hermas

In the third of his *Visions,* Hermas beholds a large tower.[40] This is the church. Angels are constantly at work, building the tower from perfectly square white stones to make it smooth and even. There are many stones on the building site, however, and not all of them are flawless. Some stones are uneven, others have cracks, or have lost a corner or two; some are round, others are completely broken. All these faulty stones have been thrown aside by the workers. They lie scattered around the tower—some nearby, others farther off. These stones represent, needless to say, various types of sinners: the uneven stones are nonpracticing Christians (6.2), the stones bearing cracks are the contentious (6.3), the stones lacking corners are Christians whose conduct is deficient (6.4), the round stones are the rich (6.5). These stones nevertheless do not lie very far away from the tower. The Christians whom they represent still have a chance to be joined into the edifice of the church, on one condition—and this is Hermas's message: they must do penance. The broken stones, on the other hand, have forfeited all hope—they are the hypocrites (6.1). Total rejection will also be the fate of the ones who have lapsed through doubt or moral corruption (7.1–3).

Hermas envisions a moral rearmament of the Christians, and he proposes for this purpose a reconstruction of the church by means of a new contract, a discipline of penance, which is needed to complement the first contract already made in baptism. He conceives of this program of reform in terms of the unity of the church. By getting rid of the sinners, he says,

[39]*1 Clement,* albeit a generation earlier, may of course also be considered from this perspective. See J. S. Jeffers, *Conflict at Rome: Social Order and Hierarchy in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991). On the other hand, the recent analysis by O. M. Bakke, *Concord and Peace: An Analysis of the First Letter of Clement with an Emphasis on the Language of Unity and Sedition* (WUNT 143; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), warns against easy inferences about a church political agenda in that text.

[40]*Vis.* 3.2.4–8.9; also *Sim.* 9.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000690 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> the church of God will be purified, as you could see when the stones were removed from the tower, given over to the evil spirits, and thrown away. Thus there will be a single body made up only of those who are pure. Just as the tower became as of a single stone when it was purified, so will the church of God be when it is purified, once the wicked, the hypocrites, the blasphemers, the doubters, and the wrongdoers of all kinds have been cast out. When they have been cast out, the church of God shall be one body, one mind, one thought, and one love. (*Sim.* 9.18.2–4; my translation)

Hermas wants two things: morally upright Christians and a unified church. But for him these are simply two aspects of one and the same thing. The division among Christians he so frequently deplores[41] is one of the *moral* defects he wishes to purge.

Hermas's views on the Church may be taken both as a testimony to the divisiveness characterizing Roman Christianity in his time and as a reaction against it. The current disunity and lack of central control, as many people calling themselves Christians fail to live in accordance with Christian norms, are intolerable because ideally the church should be one. Unity must be reestablished, and the means to achieve it is, as we saw, penance. The chief threat against unity for Hermas is moral corruption. He has, certainly, one or two things to say about teachers of false doctrines too,[42] but it is the moral ruin of these teachers that makes them alien to the ideal of the church, not their doctrines.

Hermas's program of purgation seems not to have been carried out in practice. His vision of a renewed church did not lead to the establishment of a new church organization into which only the pure were accepted. The discipline of penance was institutionalized only much later, in the third century, and then under very different circumstances.[43]

Marcion

Like Hermas, Marcion seeks a reformation of the church. The criteria for church membership that Marcion formulates, however, are both more precise and more extensive than what we find in Hermas. He wants to do away with the Jewish scriptures; instead he proposes that the church establish her own canon. He also wants all Christians to subscribe to the particular view that their God is not the Jewish god, but a more elevated and previously unknown deity. Further, they must hold that what Christ saved us from is material existence, and that sex, chaining us to the body, is best avoided. For Marcion, these criteria define what Christianity is: they aim to delimit the existing diversity among those who call themselves

[41] *Vis.* 3.6.3, 9.2,7–10; *Mand.* 11.12; and *Sim.* 8.7.2, 4–6; 9.4; 10.1–2; 9.23.1–3; 9.31.4–6.

[42] See n. 37, above.

[43] The early history of the penitential institute has been controversial. A fairly recent study is I. Goldhahn-Müller, *Die Grenze der Gemeinde: Studien zum Problem der Zweiten Busse in Neuen Testament unter Berücksichtigung der Entwicklung im 2. Jh. bis Tertullian* (GTA 39; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000690 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Christians in the areas of canon, doctrine, and ethics, and they are seen as measures that will bring about a unitary church. Unlike Hermas, Marcion also endeavored to put his program of reform into practice. The fact that he did not win over the other Christian leaders in Rome did not prevent him from building a church organization that was to grow and spread throughout the empire.

There is no doubt that Marcion and his followers thought that they were the one true Christian church. The Pauline notions of the *ekklesia* (Eph 5:22–32; Gal 4:26) were fully appropriated by Marcion.[44] Thus, Marcion was the first theologian in Rome who sought to establish an orthodox Christianity; his understanding of church unity induced him to take the practical action of defining which doctrinal interpretations of Christianity were acceptable within the church and which were not.[45] His opponents he called pseudo-apostles and teachers of Judaism[46]—in a word, heretics.

Like Hermas, Marcion reacted against what he saw as degeneration among the Christians, and wanted to re-establish a united Church. Unlike Hermas, however, Marcion emphasized uniformity of doctrine, and he also carried out his program in practice.

Valentinus

What, then, about Hermas's and Marcion's near contemporary, Valentinus? He too may be viewed as a Christian reformer who reacted against divisiveness among the Christians by preaching a vision of church unity. The idea of unity is, in fact, essential to Valentinianism. The Valentinians perceived the church of the spiritual seed—that is, themselves—as the earthly manifestation of a precosmic and hypercosmic entity that descended into this world united in the single body of Christ, the Savior. The entire purpose of the church is to realize this unity. It is brought about through rituals of initiation, where the idea of the "bridal chamber" highlights unification as a central concern, as well as through the communal singing of hymns. Unity is what characterizes the divine and the spiritual, into which the believers are assimilated, whereas division, strife, and envy belong to the fallen realm of passion-ridden cosmic existence. Valentinian tractates are filled with descriptions of the harmony reigning in the transcendent sphere of the divine fullness, the Pleroma, where the aeons, the eternal beings who make up the divine fullness, incessantly manifest the divine unity through actions of grace and the singing of hymns. This harmony is what the earthly church of the spiritual seed strives to reflect and become part of.

Unity is thus a soteriological and metaphysical principle in Valentinianism. But it is also legitimate to interpret it in social terms. In the so-called *Gospel of*

[44]See Harnack, *Marcion,* 143.
[45]Ibid., 210.
[46]Ibid., 37–38, 78–79, 196–98.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000690 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Truth, which I suspect was written by Valentinus himself, we find the following description:

> Where there is envy and conflict, there is deficiency, but where there is unity there is perfection. . . . For now their affairs are dispersed. But when unity makes the spaces complete, all will be gathered together in unity, and through knowledge all will be purified from multiplicity to unity. The matter inside them is consumed as by fire, darkness by light, and death by life. If indeed these things have happened to each one of us, then we must see to it above all that the house will be holy and silent for the unity. It is just like some who have moved to a new house. They had some jars that were no good, for one reason or another, and these jars they destroyed. But the owner of the house suffered no loss; rather he was glad, for instead of the bad jars, now only the whole ones would be used. For this is the judgement that has come from above and that has judged all: a drawn sword with two edges, cutting on either side. For the Word has come forth, being in the heart of the one who speaks it. It is not only sound, but became a body. There was a great uproar among the jars. For some had leaked dry, others were half full, others still were well filled, some were overturned, others had been purified, and some were broken. (24:25–26:15; my translation)

This passage can be read, of course, as a general salvation-historical parable, describing the advent of Christ and its consequences for humanity as a whole and for the individual. But it is also possible to understand it as a description of a specific historical moment of a Christian preacher in Rome. Words such as "house," "jars," and "body" invite an ecclesiological interpretation: we are witnessing the preaching of the Valentinian gospel of knowledge in a situation where believers are divided and confused, and the proclamation of a message about the reorganization of the Church as a united community of the perfect. The description is, *mutatis mutandis,* not all that different from the one we read in Hermas's third vision. But it also, perhaps, gives us a glimpse of concrete events, at the moment of the birth of the Valentinian church, taking place, when Valentinus and his followers decided to withdraw from the division and strife plaguing Roman Christianity, in order to be, all by themselves, the true spiritual church in unified self-sufficiency.

In this way, the Valentinians attempted yet another re-creation of a united church, such as Hermas envisioned and Marcion carried out in practice. In the case of the Valentinians, too, those who did not embrace the reform fell outside "the church." Those outsiders were not, however, regarded as heretics by the Valentinians, but rather as people who had not yet become Christians. They had remained on the level of Judaism; they were "psychic," soul-oriented people who had not yet become spiritual and Christian. They still had a chance to receive the Savior, just as the Jews were offered the chance when Jesus was present on earth. The Valentinian attitude towards these not-yet-Christians is therefore not one of rejection, as if they were heretics to be condemned, but one of gnostic evangelism and mission. Of course, a standard of orthodoxy is implicit insofar as the Valentinians drew

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000690 Published online by Cambridge University Press

doctrinal boundaries defining what and who belonged inside and outside the church. On the other hand, the Valentinians recognized an intermediary category, that of potential Christians. In the western part of the Valentinian church, this category gave rise to the notion of the psychic church, which is also a part of the Savior's body. In conclusion, the Valentinians may be described as a church organization that withdrew from the general Christian population to operate autonomously, while still maintaining an openness towards other Christians that makes it hardly correct to speak about an outright schism, as in Marcion's case. Those other Christians remained an educational challenge for the Valentinians.

From Diversity to Division to Centralization

The picture that emerges, then, of the development of Christianity in Rome in the second century, is this: Until about the middle of the century, we cannot speak of either orthodoxy or heresy in a sociological sense. Roman Christianity was divided into a number of communities that alternated between cooperation and conflict in their attitudes to one another, but no group had taken the decisive step of declaring any of the others to be outside the general category of Christianity; if such attempts were made, they were of little consequence. The concepts of orthodoxy and heresy become valid only when one group asserts itself as the only bearer of true Christianity, to the exclusion of the others. The driving forces behind such a self-conception are the inherited ideal of "the church" as a unity and the associated sectarian mentality. In our sources, Hermas, Marcion, and Valentinus would actualize this ideal. Only Marcion and Valentinus, however, went so far as to define the unity of the church in terms of doctrine and to follow up their ideas by action: Marcion declared a break with the rest of the Christians; Valentinus effected a more subtle withdrawal. Here we have, for the first time in Rome, examples of an impulse to establish a form of restrictive orthodoxy.

Both the Marcionite and the Valentinian churches were, however, minority movements, factional offshoots from the Christian diversity in Rome. Only towards the end of the century, and most clearly during the episcopate of Victor, is there evidence that other Christian communities in Rome had joined to form a somewhat more unified organization, one that began to issue warnings about heresy and to excommunicate heretics. This historical process was governed by a continuous tension between decentralizing and centralizing forces, and it passed through three phases: a period of division, in which the decentralizing forces were the strongest; a period of reaction to the divisiveness, breeding factional offshoots; and finally, the establishment by the centralizing forces of a monepiscopate controlling the majority of Rome's Christians.

At this point we may also try to answer the question formulated at the start of this essay: Why were Valentinus and his followers not excommunicated or condemned? The answer that can now be given is that in Valentinus's time, no central ecclesiastical authority yet existed to do either of these things. There was no unitary "church"

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000690 Published online by Cambridge University Press

from which one could be expelled. And by the time "the church" was finally established, the Valentinians, like Marcion and his followers, had long ago departed to create their own churches. Excommunicating them was not an option, since they had not participated in the gradual unification of the Roman congregations that produced a centralized church from which "heretics" could be expelled.

This model of the establishment of a united structure in the Roman church towards the end of the second century raises other questions in turn. How is it that a centralized organization and uniformity of doctrine could be enforced at that moment in history, whereas it was impossible fifty years earlier? What made it possible for Victor to exercise a power that had been unattainable for Rome's earlier Christian leaders? The answers to these questions, however, cannot be given here.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000690 Published online by Cambridge University Press