

## CHAPTER V

### ***The Early Church's Adherence to the Gospels***

When the Gospels were being written, they did not encompass all that was known about Jesus (John 20:30). They were composed in the midst of a rich oral tradition, passed on by the apostles and other eyewitnesses. The oral tradition continued to possess equal authority with the written Gospel into the middle of the second century, and both oral and written traditions lived together in the Church.

The earliest Church fathers drew from both traditions. St. Ignatius, who lived at the beginning of the second century, showed knowledge of material that is found in two or three of the Gospels, but whether it came from the written Gospels or from oral tradition is difficult to ascertain. His references may come either from oral tradition, from what he had heard from those who were in touch with the disciples of the apostles, or from his memory of the Gospels which he had read.<sup>1</sup> In the middle of the second century, St. Justin the Martyr quoted directly from the written Gospel and drew upon the oral tradition as well. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, 47:5, he quotes Jesus as saying: "In what I find you, in this will I judge you." This particular

saying does not exist in any of our four Gospels, and presumably was derived from oral tradition.<sup>2</sup>

Although Christian writers of the second century considered the oral tradition to be as authoritative as the written tradition, they demonstrated an increasing tendency to rely upon the written Gospel accounts. This subtle change was due to the spread of the Christian movement in the Hellenistic world, to the rise of heretical literature, and to the first attempts at creating a New Testament canon. It is the process by which the New Testament books came to be recognized that concerns us here.

### *The apocryphal Gospels.*

In addition to the four canonical Gospels which we know, there were a number of other books, composed at the same time, purporting to tell of the life and teachings of Jesus. Most of these apocryphal Gospels were produced either to fill the gaps in the canonical books, often supplying imaginative material for this purpose, or to promote some Gnostic teaching. When we come to the apocryphal Gospels after reading the canonical ones, we find ourselves in a completely new world, one which is full of wonders and legends and almost devoid of historical detail.<sup>3</sup>

The infancy Gospels attempt to supply information about the childhood of Jesus which is not given in the canonical Gospels. In this literature, which no longer reflects the atmosphere of His life, Jesus is not presented as the real child He was,<sup>4</sup> and His image in these Gospels contradicts the picture of Jesus that we have in the four canonical Gospels. As a little child, He allegedly performed wonders. Those who believed in the miracles of the infancy Gospels might well have questioned why Jesus did not change stones into bread or throw Himself from the pinnacle of the Temple. The miracle which the devil demanded of Jesus during His temptation is precisely the type of miracle that we find Jesus per-

forming in the apocryphal literature of the New Testament. He displayed His divine power before the eyes of many. He performed miraculous works just because He was challenged to do them.<sup>5</sup> In the infancy Gospels the historical incarnation of the canonical Gospel narrative is replaced by an unhistorical, docetic incarnation.<sup>6</sup>

Like a number of other apocryphal Gospels, the Gospel of Thomas is permeated with Gnostic tendencies. The Gnostics developed a highly complex system to describe the structure of the heavenly world, which was separate from the material world. The Gnostics did not display any interest in the historical Jesus. They were among the first to separate "Jesus" from the "Christ," and they based their exegesis upon this strict differentiation. The divine Christ, conceived of as an emanation from the eternal Deity, descended upon the man Jesus as the time of His baptism, and left Him before His passion. The Gospel of Thomas has no narratives or historical framework, and it consists solely of the secret sayings of Jesus. The book starts:

These are the secret words which Jesus the Living spoke and [which] Didymus Judas Thomas wrote. And He said: He who will find the interpretation of these words will not taste death.<sup>7</sup>

This preface is followed by more than one hundred secret sayings of Jesus. Some of the sayings of Jesus as preserved by the Church and incorporated in the canonical Gospels are completely transformed here into their opposites. This was done by the Gnostics in order to propagate some of their teachings. The Gospel of St. Matthew records that Jesus said, "When you give alms, sound no trumpet before you" (6:2), and "When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites" (6:5), and "When you fast, do not look dismal" (6:16). Jesus expected His followers to give alms, to pray, and to fast. He does not say "if" you do these things, but "when" you do them. He did not give an option, but took these activities for granted. Now, in the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, the disciples asked Jesus whether He wanted them to fast, pray, and give alms, and Jesus answered, "Do not

speak falsely and what you hate, do not do" (saying 5). In saying 14, Jesus speaks more directly, and even rejects fasting, prayer, and giving alms: "If you fast, you will beget for yourselves a sin, and if you pray, you will be condemned, and if you give alms, you will do harm to your spirits." When He was asked to pray and fast by His followers, He answered: "What sin, then, have I committed, or in what have I been overcome?" (saying 101). This Gospel does not bear witness to Christ, but to the Gnostics and their teachings.

Some other apocryphal Gospels are more difficult to characterize, for we do not have complete texts of them, but only fragments. Often these fragments are similar to the material found in the synoptic Gospels. It is more probable that the authors of these apocryphal Gospels were acquainted with the canonical Gospels and drew upon them, than that they reflected the tradition behind the Gospels. The Gospel of Peter, for example, written around the middle of the second century, seems to depend upon the canonical Gospels. The events described in this apocryphal work are divorced from the synoptic historical context, however, and are not limited to the Palestine of the first century, but might have happened anywhere. The events described in the canonical Gospels have a particular setting, but the setting of the events in the Gospel of Peter is not specified. The main difference, however, between this Gospel and those of the Church is its apologetic tone. The testimony to Christ, which is the main characteristic of the four canonical Gospels, is replaced by "direct proof of truth" in the apocryphal Gospel of Peter.<sup>8</sup> There is no description of the actual resurrection in the Church's books, but there is a detailed account of this event in the Gospel of Peter:

Now in the night in which the Lord's day dawned, when the soldiers, two by two in every watch, were keeping guard, there rang out a loud *voice in heaven*, and they saw the heavens *opened* and two men *came down* from there in a great brightness and draw nigh to the sepulchre. That stone which had been laid against the entrance to the sepulchre started of itself *to roll* and gave way to the side, and

the sepulchre was opened, and both the young men entered in . . . they saw again three men come out from the sepulchre, and two of them sustaining the other, and a cross following them, and the heads of the two reaching to heaven, but that of him who was led of them by the hand overpassing the heavens. And they heard a voice out of the heavens crying, "Thou has preached to them that sleep," and from the cross there was heard the answer, "Yea."<sup>9</sup>

An account such as this was probably used for apologetic purposes, and to satisfy the people's curiosity.

The apocryphal Gospels differ markedly from the four canonical Gospels in literary form. The Gospel of Thomas, for example, the complete text of which we possess, does not at all have the unique literary form of a canonical Gospel. The Gnostic Gospels revived old forms which had existed before the rise of Christianity.

The canonical Gospels derived their structure from the *kerygma*, the outline of events that came from the apostolic proclamation, which the Gnostics disregarded. By ignoring the pattern and order of the Gospels, the Gnostics produced their works as vehicles of their ideas, and created a picture of Jesus that would serve them. The Church rejected the apocryphal writings as mythologized, dehistoricized accounts of Jesus and His teaching.<sup>10</sup>

#### *The Church and Marcion.*

A more serious challenge for the Church came with the attempt of Marcion (ca. 150) to create his own list of acceptable books. There is no indisputable evidence that a canon produced by the Church existed before Marcion. The Church simply adhered to certain books which it considered to be expressions of its faith. Marcion excluded the Old Testament books from his canon. His New Testament consisted of a curtailed Gospel according to St. Luke, which omitted the first two chapters, and ten epistles of Paul. This was done, without doubt, under Gnostic influence, which Marcion betrays throughout his work. Without the Lucan

infancy narrative, Jesus seems to come directly from heaven, and without the Old Testament Jesus appears not as the fulfillment of God's promise in history, but as an emanation from above. Tertullian detected Marcion's aim by observing that he "cut the Scriptures to pieces in order to adapt them to his own ideas."<sup>11</sup>

In the view of some scholars, the challenge of Marcion forced the Church to create its own list of acceptable authoritative books which would serve as the norm for her life and teaching. The question arises whether we would have had a New Testament canon of the Church without such outside pressure. A similar question may be raised about the formulation of the dogma of the Trinity, which was formed against the background of the Arian controversies. The struggle with Marcion was not decisive in the formation of the New Testament canon, nor was the struggle with Arius for the Church's dogma on the Trinity. Which books were canonical and which uncanonical did not depend upon outside influences primarily. The Church adhered to its books, which it had always recognized, and thus implicitly defined what should be considered Scripture. As the answer to the question of who Jesus is, the Church similarly gave expression to its faith in the doctrine of the Trinity. With the dogma of the Trinity the Church did not create a new faith, but gave authoritative expression and formulation to what it had always believed was revealed.

Even before Marcion appeared with his canonical list, the Church relied upon its Gospels, but it needed more than two hundred years after Marcion to put the final seal of canonical recognition upon them. The Church did not select the canonical books arbitrarily. To determine which books belonged to the Scriptures and which did not, certain criteria were used. The authoritative books must have been written by the apostles themselves or by those who were their disciples, their content must be of apostolic origin, and usually they had to have been read in public worship. No one criterion was enough to include a book in the canon

of the New Testament, however. Yet a canonical book need not meet *all* the criteria. The book of Revelation, for instance, although it is of apostolic origin and apostolic authorship, was not read in the public worship of the Orthodox Church, as is still the case today. When the question of the canonicity of the Epistle to the Hebrews was raised in the West, St. Jerome fought for its acceptance on the grounds of its use in the Church. Who its author was did not matter, Jerome argued, for in any case it was the work of the Church and was read in the Church.<sup>12</sup> In spite of heeding St. Jerome's arguments for the acceptance of Hebrews into the canon of the New Testament, the Christian West, generally speaking, laid more stress upon apostolic authorship as the condition that should be fulfilled for accepting a disputed book than did the East. The tendency in the Christian East was to emphasize the content of the book, rather than its authorship.

The apostolic authority of the Gospels preceded their canonicity. The Church did not endow them with authority, but simply recognized their divine origin. Many factors contributed to the formation of the New Testament canon, but most important was the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The same spirit that guided the evangelists in writing their Gospels guided the Church through the whole process of the canonical acceptance of these books. Marcion, in his opposition to the Church's tradition, could not establish which books were inspired and which were not. What is inspired, *theopneustos* (2 Tim. 3:16), which means literally "breathed into by God," is not the product of human impulse. Scripture is not based upon man's insight, but upon the activity of God. The authority of the Gospels, or of any other part of the New Testament, lies not in the books themselves, nor is it based upon the authority of the Church in which they were produced, but comes from Christ, to whom the Gospels, inspired by the Spirit, bear witness, and whose presence is manifested in the Church's life.

The Church could not accept the Marcion canon. It was

not only incomplete, but also it was the canon of a Gnostic who tried to use the Church's books for his own purposes. Marcion attempted to manipulate the text in order to convey his own image of Christ. In its fight with Marcion, the Church adhered to all four Gospels in order to keep the image of Jesus undistorted.

*The Diatessaron and euaggelion tetramorphon.*

In the second half of the second century, some raised the question as to why there should be four different accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus. Why struggle with difficulties and differences between them? Why not create a single harmonious narrative on the basis of these four? Tatian, a Christian apologist born in Mesopotamia, who lived in Rome for an extended period of time, had the idea of producing one Gospel narrative. While Marcion had accepted only the Gospel of Luke after tailoring it, Tatian recognized all four. His goal was a harmony, a continuous narrative, and he therefore composed his *Diatessaron* (ca. 170). It was used in some churches in the East, and the Syrian Church used it until the fifth century, when Rabbula, the Bishop of Edessa, replaced the "mixed gospels" with the "separated gospels." The *Diatessaron* is proof that in the second century the Church accepted only the four Gospels. The success of the *Diatessaron* in the Eastern churches in the early period is due to the fact that it presented the Gospel narrative without the discrepancies that appeared when the four separate Gospels were compared.

The original text of the *Diatessaron* is lost. Whether Tatian produced the "Harmony" in Syriac or in Greek is still a debatable question. On the basis of later versions of his work, we know that he began and ended the *Diatessaron* with verses from the Gospel according to St. John. This does not mean that he followed the order of events and movements of Jesus as they are given in the fourth Gospel.

Often Tatian must have found the order of the synoptics preferable. Yet Tatian considered the account of the passion in the fourth Gospel superior to the narrative of the first three,<sup>39</sup> and on this particular point modern Gospel research supports him.

There is still a question as to whether Tatian displayed some Gnostic tendencies in the production of the *Diatessaron*. On the basis of St. Irenaeus' testimony, Tatian was a disciple of St. Justin the Martyr. He left Rome after Justin's martyrdom, and then probably came under the influence of certain Gnostic circles. Did he write the *Diatessaron* before or after accepting the views of a group of Gnostics known as Encratites (those who exercise self-control), who denied the sanctity of marriage and forbade the use of wine in the Eucharist? Some modern scholars are inclined to conclude that the *Diatessaron*, whenever it was written, was free of Gnostic tendencies. The ancient authorities, however, are of the opposite opinion. A well-known bishop of Cyrrhus, Theodoret (ca. 393-466), who was acquainted with Tatian's *Diatessaron* in the Greek language, wrote that Tatian omitted the genealogies that speak of Jesus as David's descendent according to the flesh, and that he did so under the influence of Gnostic teaching.

The *Diatessaron*, whether or not it was free of Gnostic tendencies, was of course, not a divine-human work such as the Gospels are, but simply a human document. The diversity of the inspired Gospels was removed through the process of harmonization, and this removal imposed upon them a uniformity which was the result of human endeavor. Any attempt at harmonizing two or three or four diverse accounts of the same event captures only one aspect of its meaning. Sometimes it may not reveal the meaning of the records which are harmonized, but, quite to the contrary, distort it completely. On the other hand, if all the differences are retained and examined without succumbing to the temptation to harmonize them, then the examined texts may yield their full meaning, as more than one aspect of the truth is

contained within them. A harmonized text can not manifest the richness of the Gospel material, for harmonization imposes limits upon it. Despite the fundamental agreement among the Gospels, each of them reveals something that is its own. Taken together, the four different accounts of the four different personalities offer us a full image of Christ. A harmonized Gospel, such as the *Diatessaron*, cannot give what the four Gospels do. The Church finally rejected the *Diatessaron* as a human fabrication, and preferred the plurality of the Gospels to a human attempt at harmonizing them.

Writing at the end of the second century, St. Irenaeus expressed the Church's view of the Gospels as providing the "foundation and pillar of our faith." The Gospel was preached by those who "were clothed with the power from on high when the Holy Spirit came upon them, [and when] they were filled with all things and had perfect knowledge." Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John "handed down to us that there is one God, maker of heaven and earth, proclaimed by the Law and the Prophets, and one Christ the Son of God."<sup>14</sup> St. Irenaeus did not express a preference for any single Gospel at the expense of the others. The heretics, according to him, preached their own views and thus corrupted "the rule of faith." They did not have a saving message to proclaim. They opposed the tradition, and considered themselves wiser than the elders of the Church or even the apostles themselves. If the Gospels had not been written, according to this father of the Church, we would still follow "the rule of tradition," which the apostles "handed down to those to whom they committed the Church."<sup>15</sup>

St. Irenaeus stressed that there are four Gospels, and "the Gospels could not possibly be either more or less in number than they are."<sup>16</sup> There is really one Gospel, "four-fold in form but held together by one Spirit." Those who "destroy the pattern of the Gospel and present either more or less than four forms of the Gospel (*euaggelion tetramorphon*)" are audacious. They cut themselves off from the

Gospel and separate themselves from the Church, from "the fellowship of the brethren." The Gnostics, in "the view of Irenaeus, "bring forward their own compositions and boast that they have more Gospels than really exist."<sup>17</sup> He insisted that the Gnostic Gospels had nothing in common with the Church's Gospels, the unity of which was guaranteed by their inspiration by the Holy Spirit. The Gnostics, as we have already noted, were able to arrange the Scriptural text according to their own liking because they disregarded the *kerygma*, the "basic blueprint."

Irenaeus defended the tradition of the Church against the attacks of the authors of the Gnostic apocryphal literature, as well as against Marcion and Tatian, both of whom showed distrust of the Gospels and wanted to reduce their material to a level acceptable to them. The Church adhered to and defended its books as the expression of its faith and life. It firmly rejected the idea of reducing the Gospels, and preserved them whole. The Gospels were written to tell us both of the true humanity as well as the divinity of Jesus. The authority of the Gospels came from Christ Himself, to whom they bore witness.

The Gospels were very specific about the time when the events they described occurred, as well as their setting. In contradiction to the Gnostics, they showed how God became man, entered human history, and lived and died as a man among us. The Gnostics contrasted the divine and the human, and did not admit that the two could meet.