

Clive Skewes takes a solid look at the orthodoxy of theological diversity, its origins and proponents. He overviews the response by Andreas J Kostenberger and Michael J Kruger in their book "*The Heresy of Orthodoxy*."

'In the beginning was Diversity. And the Diversity was with God and the Diversity was God. Without Diversity was nothing made that was made. And it came to pass that that nasty old 'orthodox' people narrowed down Diversity and finally squeezed it out, dismissing it as heresy. But in the fullness of time (which of course is our time) Diversity rose and smote orthodoxy hip and thigh. Now, praise be, the only heresy is orthodoxy'. (D. A. Carson)

Carson's masterly irony refers to a widely and unthinkingly accepted reconstruction of the Bible and the Church which undergirds considerable scholarship on early Christianity. It surfaces today in not a few of our pulpits and conferences as well as Progressive Christianity and the push for pan-sexuality and same sex marriage under the mantra 'Unity in diversity'. Theologically this phrase originally referred to the diversity of gifts in the church but is now used in the UCA to justify the variety of conflicting allegiances, moralities, interpretations, theologies and religions in our church. One of our leaders epitomized this position when defending Victoria's inaction over the heterodox teachings of Dr. McNab, saying in a mammoth understatement, 'We are a broad church'. This reconstruction of Bible and Church fits in well with our present age which prides itself on its independence, rejection of authority, and embrace of pluralism. Truth is dead; long live diversity!

This reconstruction originates in the so-called Bauer Thesis. Walter Bauer in his book *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (1934) advanced the radical thesis that the Roman church rewrote the history of the early church, making its interpretation of primitive Christianity the 'orthodox' view and depicting other early Christian teachers as heretical and immoral. According to Bauer, forms of Christianity that came to be understood as 'heretical' were prior to and more widespread than the so-called orthodox teaching. Thus, many Christian movements in the early church commonly viewed as heterodox are claimed to constitute authentic primitive expressions of the religion of Jesus. Bauer claimed that before the 4th century Christianity was but a seething mass of diverse and competing factions, with no theological centre which could claim historical continuity with Jesus and his apostles.

One of the foremost proponents of the Bauer thesis in the twentieth century was Rudolf Bultmann who made the thesis the substructure of his New Testament theology which has had a large impact on generations of scholars. It was Bultmann who gave Christianity as 'mythology' its classic theological description, expressing not an objective picture of the world in which we live but expressing man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives. History is subordinated to subjectivity. Bultmann's students sought to escape pure subjectivity in a renewed quest for the historical Jesus. Since Bultmann had effectively disassociated the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history, people might have radical doubts about the Christ of faith. The goal of the new quest was to re-establish an historical foundation for the credibility of the Christian proclamation. Rather than escaping subjectivity the new quest has spawned a flood of popular and scholarly reinterpretations of the historical Jesus (e.g. the writings of John Selby Spong, the Jesus Seminar and the claims of Progressive Christianity), and not a few conspiracy theories about Christian origins, leading through some feminist theologies operating without scriptural boundaries to torrid fantasies such as *The Da Vinci Code*. As Ernst Kaemann warned in 1953 'The issue today is not whether criticism is right but where it is to stop'.

Bauer's thesis did not appear in English until 1971 and drew a series of powerful critiques against it. Yet many today who advocate accepting any and all beliefs as being equally Christian base their position on the thesis of Bauer and his contemporary disciple Bart Ehrman, a prolific scholar who has written over twenty books (some becoming best sellers). Ehrman has promoted Bauer's thesis in an unprecedented way in publications such as *Time*, *The New Yorker*, and *Washington Post*, appearing on *Dateline NBC*, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *CNN*, *The History Channel*, *National Geographic*, *the Discovery Channel*, *the BBC*, *NPR* and other major media outlets. (see <http://www.bartdehrman.com>). Others have popularized Bauer's thesis in various ways, e.g. the Gnostic theologian Elaine Pagels, Robert Funk, founder of The Jesus Seminar, feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Reuther, to name a few, and since the Enlightenment scholars have often depicted a Jesus who differs from the orthodox presentation of him. But Ehrman has managed to capture the public eye, calling Bauer's thesis 'the most important book on the history of early Christianity to appear in the twentieth century'.

Bauer, and now Ehrman, propose that what we view as Christianity today is not the Christianity of the apostles and certainly not what Jesus taught. Rather there were diverse opinions about Jesus, his teaching and that of the apostles, and no one view was any more right than any other. The 'traditional' view on the Virgin Birth, for instance, came about because the Roman Church finally won enough theological and political power to squash any opposition to their position. What we know as orthodox Christianity represents the view of the winning side rather than the truth of the gospel.

This reconstruction has recently surfaced among certain media darlings (in the USA) who rush to confidently tell people in TV documentaries and through the print media 'that earliest Christianity knew nothing of the "narrowness" of orthodox belief'. This suits 'a culture which wants to recreate early Christianity after its own stultifying image'. (Nicholas Perrin).

Now a comprehensive critique of the Bauer-Ehrman thesis has arrived on the scene from Andreas Kostenberger and Michael Kruger in their volume *The Heresy of Orthodoxy: How contemporary culture's fascination with diversity has reshaped our understanding of early Christianity*. This book is no stroll in the park for it deals with many-layered issues. But in very readable language it is an intriguing introduction to the Bauer thesis and its contemporary resurgence, while layer by layer it demonstrates the failure of Bauer to account reliably for the history of communities, texts and ideas that flourished in the era of early Christianity. The authors, in looking at the early origins of Gnosticism, the process that led to the canon, what our manuscript evidence is, how texts were copied and circulated in the ancient world, and whether the New Testament text was tampered with on the way, demonstrate with clarity and compelling force that Bauer's thesis, though long embraced, is full of problems that need to be faced. They show there is a unified doctrinal core in the New Testament, as well as a degree of legitimate diversity, and that the sense of orthodoxy among the New Testament writers is widespread and pervasive.

However the main purpose of this book is not to debunk Bauer. Others have provided compelling refutations and these are carefully foot-noted. For example, David Liefeld's paper: 'God's Word or Male Words? Postmodern Conspiracy Culture and feminist Myths of Christian Origins'* (Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, No. 48 2006), which should be read along with this book. The intriguing question for the authors is why the Bauer-Ehrman thesis commands paradigmatic stature when it has been soundly discredited in the past. The reason is not that its handling of data is so superior or its reasoning so compelling.

Rather, Bauer's thesis, as popularized by Ehrman, Pagels and the fellows of the Jesus Seminar, has obtained compelling influence over people who are largely unacquainted with the specific issues it addresses because it resonates profoundly with the intellectual and cultural climate in the West at the beginning of the twenty first century. Kostenberger and Kruger unmask the way contemporary culture has been fascinated with and mesmerized by diversity and the impact this has had on some readers of the New Testament.

What can be done about this? That question is addressed all too briefly in the book's last three pages: we should continue to preach the gospel in season and out, we should continue to confront false gospels including the gospel of diversity, and we should proceed prayerfully recognizing the spiritual dimension of the issue. Indeed the question demands another volume. I was puzzled by the lack of any attribution to Michael Kruger in the footnotes or Index although his name appears as co-author.

The authors have provided a valuable service to the contemporary church and a valuable resource for ministers, leaders and teachers, and any concerned about what is being done to the Christian faith by those we expected to know better.
(Clive Skewes)

THE HERESY OF ORTHODOXY by ANDREAS J. KOSTENBERGER, and MICHAEL J. KRUGER. Publisher Crossway. Available at WORD (\$20.95) and KOORONG bookshops.

**Liefeld's paper is important in accounting for the growing fascination with diversity. His paper points out that the impact of events such as the assassination of President Kennedy, Vietnam and Watergate (and I would add increasing public scandals) has created a situation whereby 'how the world really is', a major theme of popular fiction - particularly the espionage thriller - has become a problem for American (and eventually our own) culture, leading to a growth of conspiracy theories through the modern media explosion which makes the proliferation of conspiracy theories possible and at the same time validates them. Thus conspiracy theories inhabit a post-modern plausibility structure in which they are not only intelligible but credible. This provides people with compelling reasons for falling back on their own insights, which feeds into the cult of the self. In such a situation diversity trumps orthodoxy.*

Clive Skewes: August 2010