

*For Val*

# THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CENTURIES

Philip Rousseau



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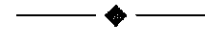
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## Chapter 4

# INDIVIDUAL VIRTUE AND ITS SOCIAL SETTING

Two enterprises had now been set in train: Paul's redefinition of Judaism and the gospels' portrayal of a Saviour. Paul depicted his communities as fields of energy powered by the impact of God's Spirit; the gospels attempted to explain and define that energy's source. The two sets of texts were closely related – Jesus is present in Paul's letters and the Spirit moves throughout the gospels – but reflection followed experience. Moreover, the towering Christ of Paul was given, in the gospels, a human, Galilean face. An intense acknowledgement of inner release could now be projected on an individual who had both known and overcome the contradictions of life. Exhilaration and admiration are likely to have been fused in the lives of individuals, but the written distillation of that discovery and commitment was bequeathed to the next generation in separate forms. While Christians of the early second century may have recognized their own communities in those inspired by Paul, their inner sense of loyalty, their awareness of needs at once painful and assuaged, could now be focused on Jesus the man – sympathetic, vulnerable and triumphant.

Both the communal styles and the reflective emphases were contentious from the outset, and remained so as they gathered momentum. Paul preserved elements of Hellenistic Judaism that laid his cosmology open to misinterpretation, and he failed to resolve all issues of observance, sinfulness and renunciation, even though he offered the insights that a resolution would require. As for the writing of gospels, Christians continued to judge in different ways how human Jesus might have been and how he was related to the Father. Division of opinion was inevitable; and so, therefore, were different conceptions of what a church should look like. The motives that had governed Paul's converts were still at work, but arguments about authentic belief

continued to affect the structure and expansion of the Christian communities. The opinions preserved in what has come to be called the New Testament were not yet available in condensed form, as a universally accepted and coherent account of right doctrine. Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch wrote before that corpus was complete, and they defended their style of authority and order in the face of contrasting opinion.

While earliest Christianity exhibited, therefore, with surprising speed, characteristics of thought and behaviour that would mark later centuries, agreement was never one of them. Many doors remained open, many choices had yet to be made, a range of futures was available. The Christian imagination was still vivid, creative, even fevered. Christians were excited and uncertain, still not hedged about by the narrowing sobriety of longer experience. It is true that the writings of the Apostolic Fathers reflected the world of Paul and reinforced the insights he had made attractive. The breadth of Ignatius's correspondence and his easy progress from church to church, during his journey to martyrdom in Rome (sometime during the earliest years of the second century), mirrored the network of Pauline communities. The early gospels, for their part, had further defined the religious values deemed appropriate to believers, and had provided additional and enduring insights into the meaning of divinity, redemption and history. Ignatius, in his letter to Philadelphia, referred to the gospel as 'the flesh of Jesus' and wished churches like that of Ephesus to be 'of one mind with the apostles'. None of that yet represented, however, rigid church discipline. The challenge for us is to explain how, even when the sense of heritage was fractured and adapted to differing views of religious obligation, Christianity could still have begun to acquire in this period a coherent profile in the Mediterranean world.

Three themes have traditionally been seized upon as keys to that coherence – three victories: over error, idolatry and the Roman state. The identification and condemnation of heresy (victory over error), the assimilation of Greek and Roman culture (victory over idolatry) and the triumph of the martyrs (victory over the state) seem to have guaranteed the unity, appeal and eventual dominance of the Christian religion. This and the following two chapters will weigh and adjust those lines of thought, suggesting a different triad. A move towards unity, first at a local level and then more generally, was both prompted and sustained by the asking and answering of a simple question: how should one live? Unity demanded, therefore, a formative discipline, which drew upon the cultural practices of the non-Christian world. That dependence encouraged in its turn an engagement with the state that reached beyond a heroic confrontation between persecutors and martyrs. However,

we cannot develop those themes in a tidy sequence. We shall observe from three heights, as it were, a single plain of endeavour. The goals, the formation and the circumstances of Christians cast three kinds of light on their endeavours. The quality of institutional and spiritual ideals hints at the processes by which they were expressed and maintained. The development of a Christian culture served the interests of doctrine as well as of conduct. The pressure of relations with the 'world' affected its stability and its ideology.

### UNITY WITHIN AND AMONG THE CHURCHES, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN 'ORTHODOX' TRADITION

Unity has always held a dominant place in the Christian mind. Failure to achieve it reinforces its desirability. The prayer of Jesus in John's gospel, 'that they may be one', has rung down the centuries with moral force, prompting continuously the question of what kind of unity Christians should work for. It is possible to argue that, between the writing of the *First Letter of Clement* (1 Clement, written in AD 96) and Cyprian's treatise *On the Unity of the Catholic Church* (written in AD 251), a single 'Church' had come into being, although in a sense that we shall have to define with care. The fact remains surprising because Christian communities were small, scattered, and parochial. In the early second century, one would have found in some cities only dozens of believers. Even in larger groups, Christians occupied no more than forty or so urban centres and made up barely one in a thousand of the empire's population. Nevertheless, the witness of Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia around 110, and of Justin and Irenaeus in later decades, suggests a wide diffusion, including (by the later period) a predominance of gentile converts, varying levels of education and a presence in country areas. The *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* imply the same for Africa, and Tertullian (in his *Apologeticum*) applauded (even if with some exaggeration) Christianity's penetration of 'cities and islands, forts and townships'. After barely a century and a half, some of its leaders were beginning to think in terms of a world-wide movement – a single household, as Irenaeus saw it, in spite of persistent regional tones and emphases; recognizably 'Christian' everywhere, exhibiting a homogeneity of belief and expression that older cults were unable to attain.

Do those confident assertions express an ideal, or relate an achievement? As I suggested in Chapter 1, we are certainly dealing with more than unity of doctrine. The Apostolic Fathers describe for us concerns at once more local and more diverse. *1 Clement*, written by a leader of the Christian community

in Rome (and traditionally regarded as the city's bishop), was designed (like Paul's letters earlier) to resolve tensions in the church of Corinth. The letters of Ignatius, distributed some ten years later, displayed a similar concern for the spiritual morale of other churches – those at Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Philadelphia and Smyrna, as well as at Rome. He also wrote a personal letter to the bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp; and Polycarp himself wrote to the church of Philippi. A range of other documents, to which I shall refer again, are clustered in the same period, although hard to date precisely: *Hermas's Shepherd*, probably written in Rome; the *Letter of Barnabas*, possibly written in Alexandria (an important cultural centre for Jews as well as Greeks); and the *Didachē*, so valuable as a witness to early Christian worship, and probably written in Syria. Those texts, together with the letters to Timothy and Titus, those attributed to Peter, James and John, the *Letter to the Hebrews* and *Revelation*, give a vivid but tellingly fragmented picture of church life in the two or three generations after Paul.

Since *1 Clement* was written in the face of Corinthian division, it was natural that harmony should be its chief preoccupation. Without attacking a specific error, the writer betrayed a feeling that jealousy and persecution had infected the developing community. Some of its enemies were to be found in its own ranks. Clement's ideal – based on Jewish antecedent – was a single household of the saved, called together by God. Failure to achieve that stability would undermine the goals of the community: immortality, justice, honesty, faith, discipline and understanding. We find in the *Shepherd* the same regard for close-knit loyalty. Hermas was particularly worried about hypocrisy. It was no longer easy to distinguish the honest from the pretenders. For that reason he attacked 'foreign' teaching, which he saw as precisely the contribution of the hypocrite. The fundamental problem, however, was self-aggrandizement. Hermas reveals a community already divided into grades – as much by its vices as by its institutions. His surest antidote may have been hospitality (recommended also in *1 Peter*), which gave clear evidence of a promising cohesion – 'receiving into their houses with gladness the servants of God'. Unity was a goal achieved, therefore, not by obedience or conformity but by purity of heart.

Ignatius deployed in his letters, it is true, a broad and forceful range of words against those in error, castigating 'evil teaching' that was 'strange' (in the sense of 'other') and using (in his letters to Ephesus and Tralles) the Greek word 'heresy'. He described such doctrines as 'offshoots', making clear their supposed novelty and deviance. (His friend Polycarp exhorted the Philippians to 'turn back to the teaching given us from the beginning'

– appealing to the paradigm that Walter Bauer questioned.) But Ignatius also wanted a generous community. His most specific attack – when he used the Greek word ‘heterodox’ to describe ‘strange ideas about the grace of Jesus Christ’ – was aroused by a failure in Tralles to show ‘grace’ to the needy. Like Hermas, he wished for those in error a chance of repentance more than all else. (Polycarp voiced the same desire, perhaps recalling 2 *Thessalonians*.)

In spite of an anxiety, therefore, about right and wrong doctrine (no less present in Paul), and in spite of an appeal to authenticity based on unbroken tradition, Ignatius mounted his attacks within a framework designed to guarantee the cohesion of this or that community and to invigorate their senses of purpose and destiny. Orthodoxy was not the same as unity: in that much, Bauer was correct. Merely adhering to one set of ideas as ‘right’, while rejecting all others as ‘wrong’, would never have guaranteed social cohesion – indeed, it could have hinted at beleaguered self-righteousness. It was not, therefore, the gradual ascendancy of an orthodox position that created the unity we are trying to identify: rather unity, achieved on other grounds and by other means, created a climate within which orthodoxy could assert itself. There was, we must agree, a change in the relationship between opinion and community. As Christians acquired a sense of forming one church, diversity of opinion could no longer take refuge in social isolation. Conflicting views were forced to fight for their corners within a single community. Yet the process was a slow one, and social cohesion and doctrinal agreement were not the result of uncomplicated convergence. Christian conduct in the later third century and beyond shows us clearly that the churches continued to develop along a variety of paths, defined particularly by regional cultures; and no one saw that as a necessary threat either to their shared values and common practices or to their universal creeds.

### AUTHORITY AND LEADERSHIP: THE RISE OF THE BISHOP

Let us explore, therefore, the notion that the increasing order of Christian communities and, in particular, the emergence of stable styles of leadership were orientated less towards doctrinal rectitude and more towards social cohesion in the cause of spiritual growth. (It needs saying at once – and the point will recur – that even that adjustment of perspective depends on the fitness of texts that often calculatedly defended one pattern of leadership against another, and a pattern of leadership that may not have been widely accepted.) The community in Corinth, according to 1 *Clement*, was ‘called and

made holy by the will of God’. Its hallmarks were faith, devotion, hospitality and ‘knowledge’. The author stressed a need for tolerance. A church was a community of mercy, because all were tested in the same theatre of spiritual combat. And mercy, both human and divine, operated over time: resurrection was at once anticipated and experienced. Christians, lodged in the company of the devout, were living through a segment of the grander history that reached, as it had for Paul, from Adam to the coming of the kingdom. Clement’s particular time-line ran from creation, through the coming of Jesus, the calling of the apostles, and the preaching of the Christian message, to end with the appointment of ‘superintendents and their helpers’ – the familiar Greek words *episkopoi* and *diakonoi*. (He alluded also to ‘leaders’ (*hegoumenoi*) and ‘elders’ (*presbuteroi*) and confused matters slightly by calling his *episkopoi presbuteroi* as well.) What did Clement hope or suppose that those men would do? They certainly did not represent, at that early stage, a calculated safeguard against error, but rather performed a service (Clement used the Greek word ‘liturgy’, meaning the fulfilment of a public obligation); and they were expected to do so ‘with the consent of the whole church’. Specifically, they were linked with worship. The *episkopoi* ‘present the gifts . . . without blame’. History had culminated, therefore, in the act of worship, a natural response to the redeeming sweep of time.

Unfortunately, Clement’s particular interests prevent us from assuming that the practices he referred to were clear-cut and stable, let alone widely accepted. Even his own prescriptions betray a looseness of vocabulary. Only in later texts does the bishop appear to gain a more secure position in the ecclesial landscape. ‘Elders’ in 1 *Timothy* ‘labour in preaching and teaching’, and so do ‘bishops’. There is a similar link in the letter to Titus between bishops and elders (to be appointed ‘in every town’). Their responsibilities seem to have been, therefore, still in part liturgical; but the preoccupation in these texts had become broader. A bishop should be ‘well thought of by outsiders’, while acceptance within his own community sprang from the ‘prophetic utterances’ heard (in Timothy’s case) ‘when the elders laid their hands upon you’ – a combination of inspired perception and ritual gesture that recalls the ‘commission’ of Paul at Antioch, as described in *Acts*. A candidate had also to prove himself directly, making ‘confession in the presence of many witnesses’. He had to manage his church as he would his own household. Similar demands were placed upon the deacons who assisted him. Their skill in household management was directed more to material affairs than to guidance and command: yet a deacon’s faith and conscience had also to be ‘tested’ – a sign that candidates were sifted.

The fact that such straightforward and assured statements sought to nestle under a Pauline umbrella may reflect a fragile, defensive position, adopted well inside the second century. Ignatius of Antioch reflected a comparatively local and possibly personal interpretation of episcopacy, which we cannot assume was universally accepted. He was writing to bishops, after all, expressing consistently the view that the bishop was, in a sense, the church. Obedience was crucial – Ignatius used the language of subjection (which was demanded equally by ‘the presbyterate’). He based those convictions on what he saw as a close link between bishops and Jesus, whom he described to the church of Magnesia as ‘the bishop of all’. That quickly implied a unity among the bishops themselves, established ‘throughout the world’. So we have the striking phrases addressed to Ephesus and Smyrna: ‘We must regard the bishop as the Lord himself’, and ‘It is good to know God and the bishop’. On that foundation, Ignatius hoped to build a series of complex associations, particularly between church leadership and the persons of the Trinity. Jesus had fulfilled the will of his Father, and bishops were to fulfil the will of Jesus. The bishop would represent grace, the presbyters law; or the bishop would represent God, the presbyters the apostles. And, by safeguarding the unity of the church, Ignatius’s bishop would validate its worship. There could be, according to him, no baptism or *agapē* when the bishop was absent.

There is a theoretical polish to those images that make one wonder how representative they may have been of actual practice. Certainly, one should avoid the temptation to arrange such declarations like a line on a graph, rising from Clement through Ignatius to the deutero-Pauline letters. There was no such simple curve. Other texts create a more blurred impression and hint at ways in which the surviving assertions of the Apostolic Fathers may have been resisted. A ‘presbyter’, for example, wrote *3 John*, and claimed sole authority over Gaius, the letter’s recipient. Gaius, for his part, exercised comparable authority over the ‘brothers’. He was dedicated to the ministries of love and truth (in contrast to his rival Diotrophes, who ‘likes to be first’). Here, as in *2 John*, we are dealing with second-century Asia Minor. *1 Peter* calls senior church figures *presbuteroi*, making them, like the author, witnesses to the sufferings of Jesus, and exemplars more than rulers. Polycarp referred to ‘leaders’ at Philippi, where Paul had earlier written of ‘bishops and deacons’. The *Didachē*, for all its cultic preoccupations, bestows most praise on ‘prophets’, ‘your high priests’, and only subsequently mentions bishops and deacons, who fulfilled the same ministry as prophets and teachers. The *Shepherd* also links bishops and teachers – men who ‘listen to one another’ and ‘agree with one another’. Otherwise, like *1 Clement*, Hermas referred to

‘leaders’ and thought of bishops chiefly as hospitable men, who welcomed strangers and cared for the widowed and the destitute. All such references belie the confident prescriptions of Ignatius. The variety of emphasis and preference in the second century warns us against hasty definitions.

What recurs is a wish to maintain unity, first within the local church; a unity desirable in itself, not merely the safeguard of a doctrinal position. Ignatius recommended harmony between bishop and presbyterate, using the analogy of strings in a harp. A bishop was exalted by the source of his authority, which rested (for Ignatius) neither in himself nor in his community. At the heart of that conviction lay a sense of service for the common good, which raised the leader above faction; and bishops and presbyters were supposed to provide an example – as he put it to the Magnesians, ‘a lesson in immortality’. Unity and morality were thereby wholly intertwined: division was the root of evil, and Ignatius combined his taste for order with the hope that Christians would be temples of God, imitating Jesus as Jesus had imitated his Father. Hermas and the *Letter of Barnabas* describe a similar bargain struck between leaders and communities, underpinning their sense of shared responsibility for the virtue of the group. Those claiming authority should be visible in the performance of good deeds. Prescription and advice were, according to Barnabas, to be shared among equals and not merely handed down from above. Hermas was instructed by his ‘shepherd’ – no cleric – precisely so that he could return to ‘God’s chosen’ and urge them to purge themselves of wickedness. He could expect to exercise a temporary authority, even over his own bishop, as well as over the disadvantaged of his community and over ‘the elders who have charge of the church’.

And what of worship? As we move through the second century, developments heralded by Paul, in relation both to the eucharist and to leaders, continued to converge. Responsibility for the conduct of Christian worship seems to have been placed increasingly on the shoulders of *episkopoi* and *presbuteroi*, although the process remained gradual and uneven. The *Didachē* is a major source of information, although we have to bear in mind both its weighted interest and its possible restriction to Syria. It discusses baptism (preferably in running water), fasting (on Wednesdays and Fridays), and daily prayer; but its central demand is that the community should gather on Sundays and, after public confession and reconciliation, offer prayer over the bread and the cup, in thanksgiving for unity and knowledge. The unbaptized are specifically forbidden to participate, which may indicate that some communities had allowed them to do so. (An extended baptismal liturgy is first described fully in the *First Apology* of Justin, in the middle of the century.)

'Prophets' should be allowed to 'offer thanks as they wish'. *Eucharistein*, offering thanks, seems to mean here celebrating the eucharist, but it is not clear whether a special concession is implied. No instructions are given otherwise as to who should preside over the ceremonies. Hermas was even more vague in his references, which concern chiefly private prayer (at home and in the countryside) and fasting. When we reach the period of Justin, the conduct of worship is similar to that recommended in the *Didachē*. Anticipating Dionysius in Corinth and Hippolytus in Rome, Justin refers also to the reading of sacred texts, together with more recent letters and treatises, as part of the regular worship. He retains in his *First Apology*, however, a vague term for governance or leadership (found also in *1 Timothy*). It is only in the letters of Ignatius that we find a precise and early correlation between hierarchy and worship. Once again, the preoccupation of the letters should make us cautious. Ignatius was not always specific, pursuing his more general point about unity within each church. But he did emphasize the importance of assembling frequently as a community. He thought it dangerous to imagine (as some presumably had done) that one could offer God suitable service on one's own or in small groups – perhaps a gibe at the 'prophets' of the *Didachē*. The binding presence of bishop and presbyterate was an important safeguard – indeed a touchstone, since meetings held apart from a bishop flouted authoritative commandments. Those stipulations supply us with an extended context for Ignatius's single reference to the celebration of the eucharist (in the letter to Philadelphia), which draws together the notions of one flesh, one cup, one altar and one bishop.

### ACQUIRING A FUTURE

Leadership was dedicated, therefore, to the preservation of social harmony and the ordering of formal prayer. Concern about specific doctrinal error and a corresponding defence of consensus were less evident. Later writers still accepted that argument would persist. The leader's task was not to identify principles but to resolve disputes. Even Irenaeus's respect for Rome was couched in those terms. Each of the original churches – close-knit groups, focused on the demands and promises of God – aspired to more than accurate belief. A powerful image in *Acts* presents us with the apostles in their upper room, bewildered about the timing of the coming kingdom, then seized by the spirit of God and confidently proclaiming to thousands their faith in Jesus. This shift from expectation to mission, from 'looking up into the sky' when Jesus was taken from them, to 'preaching the Gospel to the

whole of creation' under the impulse of God's Spirit has provided an attractive tool of sociological analysis. It is taken to represent the transition from the charismatic leadership of a founder to the establishment of a stable religious movement. Among the earliest Christians, so the argument runs, the final days were thought to be imminent – the *eschaton*, which would herald the coming of Jesus in glory. It dawned on them, however, that the end had been postponed or was at least unpredictable. Heightened expectation was thus undermined by a species of 'cognitive dissonance' (nothing seemed to be happening), and a longer task presented itself, extending over generations and demanding a more detailed attention to order and continuity. Mission was at once the condition and the fruit of that altered view.

Evidence gleaned from the letters of Paul shows how swiftly the current of expectation could swerve. Paul was too much a Jew to have escaped, not just the expectancy – specifically, the messianic hope – of Judaism, but also its apocalyptic temper. However, as a Roman citizen reared in the Pharisaic tradition, as a Hellenized Jew not unfamiliar with the religious traditions of Rome's easternmost provinces, he had been able to impart to the apocalyptic view a degree of abstraction that carried it beyond the narrow anxieties of a localized conventicle. He stood for mission, therefore, as perhaps no other Christian pioneer. He allowed his images of fulfilment to be set once again in creation's past, making them historical and slow-moving in ways that would counter more fevered hopes and assurances. Clement, equally attentive to Jewish traditions, developed a similar sense of extended triumph, of a resurrection happening day by day. *1 Peter* had been ready to declare, 'It is time for judgement to begin.' *2 Peter* was designed to counter a subsequent doubt, 'Where is the promise of his coming?' That was a question posed (as Ignatius also suggested) by deceitful and hypocritical teachers, with their 'ruinous heresies'. The 'day of the Lord' would come. The insistent pressure of God's apparent slowness reflected only his eternity and his patient readiness to provide (as Hermas believed) a time for repentance. (The *Shepherd*, in its fifth 'similitude', provides a clear echo: 'the absence of the master represents the time left to us until his coming'.)

The interpretation of such a change, the particular readiness to make it sociologically significant, can take its cue from a misunderstanding of apocalyptic thought. The Jewish documents associated with the persons of Enoch and Daniel came from a variety of social settings and were not always inspired by a sense of alienation, threat, or millennial excitement. The same may be said of later exemplars, like *4 Ezra* and *2 Baruch*. Even the literature of Qumran shows that heightened expectation could be combined with a

clear sense of community, rigorous discipline and a carefully ordered system of priestly instruction. The so-called *Similitudes of Enoch* (which may be Christian, at least in their final form) present a vision of the future useful to any community in any crisis, just like the eschatology and transcendence of Paul, of the *Letter to the Hebrews* and of *Revelation*. Moreover, when we think in terms of charism and institution, we should not assume that all apocalyptic visions were inimical to social order and religious cult. Constant reference in the Jewish texts to the heavenly temple and to an everlasting priesthood was carried over into Christian material. Such imagery allowed the worshipper to envisage another liturgy, enfolding but reaching beyond the Sunday eucharist. A growing institutionalization has to be interpreted in that light. Liturgical practice, closely linked with leadership and focused on the eucharist as an instrument of unity and a validation of authority, carried its own cargo of expectation. Those who waited waited now in prayer. The imminent presence of Jesus as a final judge in glory gave way to the presence of Jesus 'in the midst' of his community and 'in the breaking of bread' (as the Emmaus story in Luke's gospel had already begun to suggest). So the pulse of apocalyptic expectancy may have slowed and become more regular; but it beat still, as Christians settled down for a longer haul.

We need to be comparably cautious about the 'status inconsistency' I mentioned in Chapter 2. That may have affected the Pauline communities, but it cannot explain all further growth. A loss of advantage in politics, wealth and traditional religion was assuaged, according to sociological theory, by the consolations of an age to come. The strategem proved less necessary, given new and lasting opportunities for honourable recognition within the Christian community: the exercise of priesthood, of patronage, of exceptional virtue. Those opportunities were sustained by a hierarchical structure and an increasing air of confidence. A keen sense of 'the coming', of 'the final days' could now endure alongside not only resolute proselytism but also the readiness to breed the next generation of believers.

There was one event that acquired an apocalyptic dimension, and helped to shift the emphasis of Christians: the suppression of the Jewish revolt of 66-69. The desecration of Judaism's holiest shrine, the Temple, and the brutal imposition of Roman authority in Palestine provided a new model of persecution. *Revelation* is probably the fullest witness to the adaptation achieved. This undeniably Christian document invited the churches to see themselves as the true Jews, who would survive all current and future turmoil (its vitriol recalls the isolated paranoia of some Qumran material). It described a period of oppression preceding the consummation that Paul and

the gospels had foreseen. The genius of the work, however, perhaps not entirely conscious, resides in the symbolist obscurity of its descriptions, which allowed later generations to see their own oppression in *Revelation's* terms, and to adjust its consummation, the 'new Jerusalem', to fit their immediate hopes and fears.

It was within this new framework of humiliating oppression, therefore, that authoritative structures protected communities against the fear that all was about to be dissolved. That pattern of thought reached forward through the centuries. It affected the interpretation of martyrdom, for example, which might otherwise have stood merely for the liberation of the individual. Persecution brought also its crop of defectors and pretenders, who threatened to render almost invisible the boundaries of shared belief. Ultimately, after Constantine, citizenship itself would be redefined, to be enjoyed within the 'city of God'. Some Jews were slow to abandon all hope of political triumph – their own apocalyptic literature was given a new boost by their misfortunes at the hand of Rome. Christians, on the other hand, were able to combine a sense of impending doom with a vague and more distanced impression of how persecution might end. As for any associated impulse to proselytize, the unavoidable swing away from Palestine towards the communities of the Diaspora gave fresh urgency to Jewish relations with the Hellenistic and Roman worlds and a greater prominence to 'godfearers' – gentiles attracted to Judaism, although not necessarily to Christianity. Imbued with a growing sense of mission to the whole of humanity, Christians felt able to herald the coming of a new age of universal significance, while effectively postponing its fulfilment.

We must concentrate, therefore, on the characteristic paradox of the new religion – its ability to combine a sense of destiny with an acceptance of failure. This was felt most keenly, as by Paul in *Romans*, within individuals. The Christian community served to assure its members of God's mercy, and mediated that mercy's application. Belief endured in the coming of God's judgement and kingdom: Christians were living, as Ignatius expressed it to the Ephesians, in 'the last times'. Hermas, however, and the *Letter of Barnabas* describe a more intimate anxiety: believers wanted to know what was going to happen next. Christian time began to stretch ahead as well as behind. For Hermas, in his conversations with his 'angel of repentance', there was a time remaining, limited but generous. It was to be a time of persecution as well as of conversion, a time of 'blood and fire' that would purify Hermas like gold and bring him and others to the bright glory of 'the coming age'. The blood and the fire, like other images in the *Shepherd*, recall the

vivid prognosis of *Revelation* and find their parallel in the *Didachē*. Now, however, prophecy passed through the human heart, setting it upon a bridge between past and future. The hopes that marked Christianity were ancient but only distantly fulfilled. The past, in the *Letter of Barnabas*, one might know of, but understanding of the future was not yet available. The present, meanwhile, was the domain of wisdom, the knowledge of self.

The weakening of the community of expectation, therefore, ushered in the community of repentance. The notion was central to the work of Hermas. His Christians were quietly putting into practice the change of heart demanded amid the greater clamour of *Revelation*. He also placed a telling emphasis on the household. The tower being built in his visions (which he called the 'church') was recognizably the community of a later generation (the generation, perhaps, of the *Didachē* and certainly of Polycarp), within which children could be reared in the fear of God and slaves and women could be kept in their place. It was also the forum within which virtue was exercised. 'Virtue' here meant the care of widows and orphans, of the destitute and the distressed, the honouring of the poor as powerful advocates before God, and a generosity made possible by fasting. Here we begin to see how Pauline society might actually have affected its members. The households of Paul's authentic letters, with their almost proprietorial leadership and their domestic patterns of worship, had become more than convenient or well-endowed places of assembly: they were now a major force for spiritual formation. The angel of repentance made Hermas personally responsible for the failings of his family and for their spiritual improvement – not unlike the bishop in *1 Timothy* and the elders in the letter to Titus, each 'the husband of one wife', with children who were also 'believers'.

Seeing the household as the arena of redemption provoked anxieties about sexuality, marriage and the place of women. Hermas's handling of purity and adultery and his preference for the single life found their parallel among the churches inspired by Paul. Some had repudiated marriage altogether, in the belief that the end of the world was at hand. Others, while appealing to Paul's authority, resisted such extremes. *1 Timothy* sees exaggeration as the work of 'deceitful spirits', the 'doctrines of demons'. That caution reflected a desire to embed sexuality within a protective set of community structures. The same motives prompted respect for widows, offering them more than a choice between remarriage and oblivion. Women of sound reputation, advanced in years and faithful to the memory of one husband, soon became an integral and honoured part of every Christian group. (Those younger, however, were allowed less independence and were recommended

to remarry.) Widows are already singled out as a group in *Acts*, the beneficiaries of pious generosity. *1 Timothy* demands later that they be 'enrolled', and relatives were given first responsibility for their maintenance. Both emphases persisted. The scope made available to such women was still governed by existing convention: they were to behave 'as befits women who profess religion'. Their enthusiastic piety was thought liable to founder on female weakness, exposing them to male exploitation. They were 'weighed down by sins', in the words of *2 Timothy*, 'and driven by a range of desires, constantly learning and never able to reach an understanding of the truth'. The movement involved here, from exhilaration to control, echoed perfectly a more general decline in the spirit of expectancy and a corresponding demand for order and continuity. While exalted destiny might content itself with simple abnegation (for men as well as women), postponement of the *eschaton* demanded more a carefully controlled fertility.

Some enduring ironies resulted from that interweaving of priestly leadership, moral urgency and familial pressure. Writers confidently stipulated practices that might have struggled, in fact, in a contentious atmosphere, to gain acceptance. Some deacons, for example, may have been women – taking in that sense the phrase in *1 Timothy*, 'the women likewise [i.e. like other deacons] must possess dignity'. This possible association of women with others in authority was destined to cause confusion, and shows that the authority was claimed as well as contested. The use of the word 'elders' contributed to the tension. In the letter to Titus, reverence is demanded for 'older' women, as well as men, and more seems implied than mere age. *1 Timothy* has traditionally been taken as depressingly specific: 'Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men. She is to keep silent.' Yet in Titus's world the 'older women' clearly taught, even if under restriction – taught 'what is good [or were perhaps "the best of teachers"]' to 'train young women to love their husbands and children, to be sensible, chaste, domestic, kind and submissive to their husbands'. So judgements varied, even where liberty was limited. One can detect, in these orthodox texts, the pressures against which males would have to fight, without always winning.

## THE QUEST FOR VIRTUE, AND ITS SOCIAL SETTING

Our inquiry into the nature of second-century Christianity has already carried us a long way from episcopal autocracy and doctrinal rigidity. Social

cohesion and a clearer sense of historical continuity seem to have been of greater significance. One should highlight, above all, the culture of repentance. Christians were intent now upon a long-term task: the achievement of immortality through the conquest of vice and the acquisition of virtue. That urge remained the chief engine of ecclesiological growth, the basis of both community and hierarchy. Social motives – the chance of escape or betterment, for example, in the face of political or economic disadvantage – can lie behind any conversion; but we should not underestimate the sense of sin, of corruption, of imprisonment in matter, of distance from God – painfully felt in heart and psyche, and not always catered for by traditional religious affiliations. Explanation of the pain ranged from God's anger to the machinations of one's enemies. Christianity represented, correspondingly, either freedom from personal weakness, or a key to the cosmic and psychic maze, or perhaps just a talisman against malevolent intrigue. For many, it must have meant that expectation could become interiorized: the portents and vindications of apocalypse could be taken to stand for the drama of more intimate threats and stratagems. One no longer pinned one's hopes exclusively on a final day of reckoning, imminent or otherwise: one awaited a transformation of the self as much as of the world. Neither nature nor history nor birth nor disposition any longer defined what was possible. Weakness and inferiority lost their power to limit life. It was not just a matter of turning one's world upside down, choosing white instead of black. Christians sought a new order entirely, and thus combined their sense of a postponed ideal with dedication to moral effort. They did not want simply to exchange one 'kingdom', one political system for another: they wanted power and community to be redefined. In the process, they overrode the deadening polarities of disobedience and obedience (made obsolete by liberty), of body and soul (transcended by spirit and resurrection).

The keys to effecting this rite of passage were faith and repentance – optimism in response to promises, and a shaking off of the past. The social envelope catered for the inevitable precariousness that faith and repentance could induce, and ensured their visibility and permanence. Baptism constituted the bridge between individual and community – indeed, created and defined the community itself. It channelled and symbolized the individual act of faith and provided a corporate setting within which that faith could be protected. It demanded in particular an austerity and selflessness of life that could be policed at the same time by a controlled tolerance of backsliding. Yet faith and repentance remained deeply personal, the root of religious life. The individual Christian was one orientated anew, embracing change on the basis of

trust. Moreover, 'faith' was faith in Jesus. For that reason, we can see how the competing images of Jesus discussed in Chapter 3 could affect in varying ways the conduct of the Christian life during subsequent generations. Was he the guarantee that repentance was possible? Was he himself the model of repentance, or indeed of faith? Was he the source of one's own regret? If so, by what perceptible mechanism? Was he the one who promised victory and reward, even at the cost of his own humiliation? Did one appeal to Jesus in this cause of redemption, or was he the one who appealed? Was baptism a symbol merely of one's commitment to the new way, or was it part of the process of 'salvation'? Jesus was, of course, no longer accessible, except by prayer and hope. His absence could be taken to portend his victory ('He has been raised, he is not here'). Yet his 'spirit' still struggled to gain a hold in individual lives. Was it the spirit that brought promises to fulfilment? And what was the role of one's fellow believers? Were they accidentally, so to speak, on the same path as oneself, or did one's association with them have some organic role to play in the process of one's own salvation? Could one be saved alone? There might be as many churches as there were hopes. That was why growth in unity depended on Christians acquiring a shared view of what they could hope for under God's dispensation.

So the passage from theory to practice depended on three factors: subjective intensity, a shared sense of need, and the support of an ordered group. Abstract theory was articulated with surprising speed. Faith in Jesus meant believing not only truths about the man himself but also that he had been born to redeem believers. One acknowledged either personal or historical failure, either the 'Fall' of humanity or one's own alienation; perhaps both. One believed equally in a new engagement with God, either by personal divinization or by a reordering of the cosmos. But ideas promptly directed conduct: as in the gospels, choices were demanded. In the *Didachē* (echoing *Deuteronomy*) there were two 'ways', good and evil (or, in the *Letter of Barnabas*, light and dark). One had to adhere to a 'teaching' and step out on the appropriate path. A vigorous, radiant, truthful, trusting and disciplined life would bring, in Clement's eyes, immortality, righteousness, sincerity, assurance and holiness. The most striking feature of the *Shepherd*, with its overarching emphasis on repentance, is its readiness to develop a spirituality, a mapping of human nature as conceived by God. Its complex programme of self-improvement, especially its imagery of good and evil 'spirits' or 'angels', anticipates later masters of Christian spirituality such as Evagrius and Cassian, which makes its survival and popularity among Christian readers doubly important. Its definition of faith focuses on the discernment of spiritual

conflict within the heart, and is sustained by the conviction that God wished his creatures to achieve spiritual fulfilment. Like *1 Clement*, *2 Peter*, and the *Didachē*, Hermas provided exhaustive lists of the virtues he wished to foster, especially in his third 'vision'. He showed a particular interest in *enkerateia*, ascetic self-discipline (best explained in the sixth 'mandate'); but he regarded it as a discipline for all. *Enkerateia* came to be seen in time as attainable only by a few; and even in earlier days, degrees of commitment varied. For Hermas, however, it was inspired by a healthy fear, which he identified simply with the purified desire for good. Equally important as witnesses to such early Christian sensibility are the so-called *Sentences* or maxims of Sextus (which I shall discuss more fully in a moment). Difficult to date and ascribe, the original collection had been made by the early decades of the third century: Origen noted its popularity. The late fourth-century Latin translation by Rufinus demonstrates its remarkable endurance, comparable to that of the *Shepherd*.

The early Christian quest for virtue was marked by interiority, humility, attractiveness and a sense of social obligation. The world of the *Shepherd* is lit from within: thoughts and desires define the arena of endeavour. The shepherd, in the fifth 'mandate', inspires Hermas to courage, so that the 'holy spirit' within him might remain 'pure', unimpeded by evil, free to range within his body, serving God with joy. We witness the ease with which Christians continued to believe that their private victories offered the best assurance of their religion's universal significance. Clement, Barnabas and Ignatius shared that view. God was perceived 'with the eyes of the soul': 'See', wrote Clement, 'how near he is: none of our thoughts escapes him.' God, granting time for repentance, was seated within. 'God really lives in us', wrote Barnabas; 'we are his dwelling-place. . . . He prophesies within us, dwells within us. By opening to us the door of the temple (that is, his mouth), he grants us repentance and leads us . . . into the incorruptible temple.' *2 Peter* recognizes well the intimacy of this vocation: the message of the prophets was 'like a lamp shining in a dark place until the day dawns and the light of the morning star shines in our hearts'. A remarkable interiority inspired Ignatius also, colouring more richly his attachment to church order. In his letter to the Ephesians, for example, he wrote, 'He who has the word of Jesus for a true possession can also hear his silence . . . Let us therefore do all things as though he were dwelling in us, that we may be his temples.' The virginity of Mary and the birth and death of Jesus ('hidden from the Prince of this world') were 'three mysteries of a cry which were wrought in the stillness of God'. There was in him, as he put it to the Romans, 'no fire of love for

material things, but only water living and speaking in me and saying to me from within, "Come to the Father"'.

It is instructive to see how soon tension developed between confidence in self and dependence on God. 'A Christian', according to Ignatius, writing to Polycarp, 'has no power over himself but rests in the presence of God.' The *Didachē*, on the other hand, was assured enough to declare, 'If you can bear the whole yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect; if you cannot, then do what you can.' Hermas regarded trust in human potential as baseless without God's 'power'; but simply to acknowledge that power was to dispel debilitating fear. The act of creation had placed all things under human authority. Anyone who had God in their heart would master with ease the shepherd's régime. Indeed, believing that to be the case was half the battle. The shepherd wanted no mournful pessimism, which dragged the holy spirit down. Hermas's famous critique of *dipsychia* – 'double-mindedness', duplicity of soul – referred above all to an inner hesitation about God's mercy; and the appropriate and contrasting confidence, essential to repentance, demanded 'simplicity' (a strong and positive self-possession) and purity of heart. This subtle interplay of human and divine, of the potential and the dependent, essential to the notion of the Incarnation, although at times clouded or betrayed, would endure at the core of all that was best in Christianity. It is reflected also in the *Sentences of Sextus*. A humane and social sympathy is central to the collection – qualities not restricted to Christians, but presented by the author as the essential components of their life and community. The compiler of the maxims rejects submission to fate and makes God's providential care for individuals the chief characteristic of divinity. Faith, as in the *Shepherd*, means recognizing that fact; and faith and election by God are linked in the opening maxim: to believe was to be chosen. The implied mutuality pervades the collection. It was natural for human beings to aspire to and achieve likeness to God; it was natural for God to dwell in the human mind and heart. Freedom, understanding and acknowledgement of one's own nature: those were the instruments whereby God and creature were made present to each other.

Prophetic figures were not alone in presenting this new or freshly fashioned vision. There was a heightening of both anxiety and fervour in Mediterranean religion generally at this time, and Christianity would not have seemed the only available path to insight and self-possession. The interplay between Christian and non-Christian thought will concern us further in Chapter 5; but the *Sentences* make a particular point. Although we cannot ascribe the original maxims to Sixtus II, bishop of Rome in the late 250s, the

compiler of the collection as it now stands was clearly a Christian. Jerome thought otherwise, and his hasty and tendentious judgement has carried considerable weight; but there are too many Christian sayings to make his opinion tenable. Nevertheless, the writer borrowed from beyond the Christian circle. The philosopher Porphyry was happy (towards the end of the third century) to draw upon the same sources; and much of the material would have seemed natural to Stoics and Pythagoreans. A reluctance to attribute positive value to the body, a readiness to endure hardship in a higher cause, a prejudice against hasty advice and overconfident speculation – all had a long past in Mediterranean culture. Yet there is, as a result, a striking and twofold ease about the text: the original compiler was ready to make ‘foreign’ wisdom his own; but later readers took for granted the Christian character of the result. Eventually, each judgement fed upon the other, and one can see why. We find foreshadowed, in the special formulae of the *Sentences*, a long Christian future: a preference for the celibate life, so soon to become entangled with the exaltation of virginity; the toughness of the martyr, capable of scorning tyrants; a sense that the truth about God was either inexpressible or unfitting for the ears of the majority and that curiosity and eloquence were conducive chiefly to error and pride. All these recall the inclinations of Paul and echo the prescriptions of the gospels. The tradition as a whole serves as a paradigm for the vexed issue of Christianity’s relationship with, or distinction from, ‘pagan’ or ‘classical’ culture. It is unwise to explain the *Sentences* merely as an exercise in late imperial syncretism. The compiler’s intention was not so much to borrow as to subsume; to place moral truth in a destined Christian setting.

That setting was social. In the *Sentences*, the inner colloquy of the moral agent was not a solitary indulgence. Efforts that were made alone would come to nothing. God would not listen to anyone who did not listen to the needy or pray for the salvation of others. There was no good that could not be shared. ‘Concern for others’, as the compiler put it, ‘is the basis of religion.’ The Christian writers of this post-apostolic period naturally took their cue from the ‘great commandment’ of the Jewish tradition and from the Johannine emphasis on love. The *Didachē* opens on that note, underlining the social responsibilities that follow. Hermas kept his rigorous ideals firmly embedded in a social framework. Ignatius encouraged those at Ephesus to ‘seek who may suffer the more wrong, be the more destitute, the more despised’. ‘The beginning is faith and the end is love’ he added, ‘and when the two are joined together in unity it is God, and all other noble things follow after them.’ One of Christianity’s most arresting features was this early

insistence that virtue was a social achievement. Its system of formation and control was marked by a public coherence. Individual growth depended on that encouraging environment. Such a state of affairs was not peculiar to Christianity; but its special interpretation of personal relationships allowed it to define on its own terms the limits of a believer’s freedom and responsibility. Repentance and virtue were brought to their peak among others. When the *Shepherd* describes *enkrateia* in detail, for example, the reader is plunged into a range of social disorders – adultery, pride and deceit. As an antidote, one must strive for harmony. The care of widows, orphans and the destitute; the encouragement of the distressed, especially those with weak faith; reverence, hospitality, justice and brotherhood – such were the fruits of self-discipline. The knowledge proper to the indwelling spirit would be declared when the spirit willed it, but would be declared within the community, ‘the meeting of righteous men’, where ‘intercession is made to God’. Only the falsely inspired prophesied ‘in corners’. The *Sentences*, for all their formal emphasis on discipline, recognized the same need. The author, as well as being open to the principles of other thinkers, was steeped in Christian sentiment and coupled confident self-discipline and self-respect with a humble and compassionate regard for others, making that the touchstone of effective religious practice, the guarantee that faith and redemption could represent the fulfilment of genuinely human values. That such a view developed so soon and remained popular for so long does much to explain Christianity’s success.

## ENDURING SEEDS OF CONFLICT

### *The disputed importance of history*

Writers later regarded as orthodox remained for a long time at ease with ‘knowledge language’, but they distinguished one type of knowledge from another. The deutero-Pauline letters to Timothy attacked speculation and a craving for controversy, precisely because of their association with myth and fastidious asceticism. Hermas promised converts understanding, but he most often used the word *sunesis*, meaning shrewd perception rather than privileged insight. One was entitled to inquire into God’s purposes and to question the state of one’s soul, but one should recognize what lay beyond knowledge and concentrate on immediate tasks rather than remote speculations. Clement of Rome could adopt an exalted tone – ‘Through [Jesus] the eyes of our heart have been opened, through him our foolish, darkened understanding leaps up to the light, through him the Lord allows us to taste