STRATEGIES OF SELF-DIFFERENTIATION

No matter their diversity and disagreements, early Christians liked to imagine themselves as a single community spread across the world. The power of this self-understanding animates one of the earliest surviving Christian inscriptions, the epitaph of Abercius, bishop of Hieropolis in Phrygia, Asia Minor. Dating no later than 216 and perhaps as early as the 190s, the text commemorates the life of “Abercius, disciple of the holy shepherd,” in the first person. Abercius relates that during his life he traveled from his home in Asia Minor as far west as Rome in Italy and as far east as Nisibis and the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia. Everywhere he went, Abercius says, he found “kindred spirits,” those who shared the same faith and celebrated the same Eucharist of bread and wine. He asks that those who see his tomb and share his convictions pray on his behalf. Abercius provides a touching and dramatic witness to the unity of Christians spread throughout the Roman Empire.¹

Ironically, however, the Christians in his home region of Phrygia did not enjoy complete unity. Christians there disagreed about the legitimacy of a prophetic movement that had begun in the 160s when the Christians Montanus, Maximilla, and Priscilla claimed to receive new revelations from the Holy Spirit. Eventually known as the New Prophecy, this movement attracted many Christians with its emphasis on moral discipline, prophetic inspiration, and hope for a coming New Jerusalem. In Abercius’s day, some adherents of New Prophecy followed a leader named Miltiades. Many bishops, however, denounced the New Prophecy as false, even demonically inspired. One learned opponent of the movement even dedicated an entire treatise refuting it to Bishop Abercius. Montanus, the author argued, prophesied “in a way that conflicted with the practice of the Church handed down generation by generation from the beginning.” Maximilla’s prophecies, he noted, had not come true.² So Abercius, whose epitaph would later celebrate the presence of like-minded Christians in places as distant as Rome and Nisibis, also found himself at the center of Christian disharmony and conflict.³

Abercius’s experience demonstrates that the tension between unity and diversity that we observed in mid-second-century Rome was not unique to the Christian communities in the imperial capital. Abercius, too, expected Christians wherever they lived to share certain beliefs and practices, and he valued the solidarity among all those who followed “the holy shepherd,” Christ. And yet there were limits to Abercius’s fellowship with other Christians—if we assume that he was sympathetic to the treatise against the New Prophecy that was dedicated to him. Abercius’s correspondent declared that he, Abercius, and others like them adhered to “the true faith,” while Christians who accepted the prophecies of Montanus and his colleagues constituted a “recent schismatic heresy.” The author offered several specific criticisms of the Phrygian prophets, including the ecstatic manner in which they prophesied and their lack of prophetic successors. The writing of the treatise suggests, of course, that the line between “the true faith” and the “recent schismatic heresy” was not so clear; indeed, the author complains that the Church in Ancyr in Galatia is “deafened with the noise of this new craze.”⁴ Abercius and his colleague had to work to create and maintain the Christian fellowship that stretched from Rome to Mesopotamia; they were engaged in the process of self-differentiation and identity creation.

When historians and theologians used to tell the story of Christianity’s “crisis of Gnosticism,” they would explain, as the title of one important article put it, “Why the Church Rejected Gnosticism.”⁵ (Strangely, at least one scholar has included even the New Prophecy in “Gnosticism.”⁶) But as we have seen already in the previous chapter, there was no single “Church” that could accept or reject anything, nor was there a moniform heresy called “Gnosticism” to be accepted or rejected. There was a Gnostic school of thought, with its distinct interpretation of the Christian message, and there were a number of other Christian teachers and groups who disagreed with the Gnostics on particular points. But the dynamic of self-differentiation and boundary formation in which the Gnostics and their opponents participated was far more complex than simple “rejection” of one party by another. A variety of Christian groups negotiated their relationships with each other and with non-Christians as well. The goal of this chapter is to sketch some of the
ways in which Christians of the second and third centuries responded to the Gnostics and to each other. We shall explore the strategies by which Christians presented themselves as having the true Christian message and others as teaching what is incomplete or false.

We have already seen some of these strategies as practiced both by the Gnostics and their rivals. The Gnostics, we saw in Chapter 3, made claims to authority and truth by composing their writings as revelations that came to authoritative figures of the distant and recent past (Adam, Norea, the apostle John). They used the genealogical narratives of Genesis to depict themselves as the spiritual heirs of Seth, the good son of Adam and Eve, and others as descendants of more ambivalent or evil figures, like Cain and the sons of Noah. Gnostic authors asserted that other readers of the Bible did not understand it because they failed to see that Moses mistakenly identified Ialdabaoth as the ultimate God; in contrast, the Gnostics had the revelatory insight to offer the true readings and to correct Moses’ errors. In turn, we saw in Chapter 4 the strategies that Valentinus, Marcion, and Justin employed to label their opponents as false Christians and to legitimate their own teachings, including claims to apostolic succession and the notion of “heresy.”

In this chapter, I look at four more representative movements or figures: the Valentinian School, Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. These Christians adapted and augmented the tactics that we have already seen as they reacted to the remarkable teachings of the Gnostic school of thought and others. Because I have taken the Gnostics as my starting point, so to speak, I follow a conversation that circled around the issues that they raised, especially the teaching of higher gnosis, the use and interpretation of Scripture, and the multiplicity of God. If we were to focus on other strands of early Christian self-definition, such as the authority of the martyr or the problems of Church discipline, then we would need to examine a somewhat different cast of characters, one that included, for example, Bishop Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258), a contemporary of Origen. That story would be just as important for understanding the changing character of Christian groups in the second and third centuries and beyond.

The Gnostics, however, lead us primarily to Greek-speaking teachers of Christian thought. In Rome during the 140s and 150s, Justin, Valentinus, and Marcion were all teachers of Christianity who guided their own circles of students. They were not also what we would call ordained clergy, that is, bishops or presbyters. Bishops and presbyters were also teachers, but they more explicitly tied their teaching activity to the ritual life of the sacraments and a more formal institutional setting of worshiping communities. Christian leaders of the second and third centuries had to negotiate the relationship between teaching and the formal clergy, between teacher-centered study circles and more formally constituted Christian communities, and between what they considered true and false versions of Christianity.

Teachers of an Apostolic Tradition:
The Valentinian School

Valentinus’s program of adapting the Gnostic myth and developing its more overtly Christian features continued in the work of a school of Christian theologians who looked to him for inspiration: the Valentinian school of thought. So successful was this movement that it rapidly eclipsed the Gnostics as the greater danger in the minds of opponents like Irenaeus. Unlike the Gnostics, who practiced a highly distinctive ritual of baptism and appear to have rejected the Eucharist, the Valentinians participated fully in the baptism and Eucharist of other Christians and may have had even more rituals of their own. Valentinian teachers presented their ideas as the correct interpretations of Christian scriptures and creeds, and they claimed apostolic authority for their message. Like the Gnostic school of thought and other philosophical schools in antiquity, Valentinian groups sought to facilitate the progress of their adherents in knowledge and virtue, that is, to teach them a way of life that would lead to salvation? Valentinian theologians developed rich and compelling teachings on the entire range of subjects that Christian intellectuals usually considered—God, Christ, sin, and salvation, the sacraments, the nature of the Church, the resurrection, and so on—but here I shall focus on their strategies of self-differentiation with respect to other Christians. How did Valentinian Christians present their reinventions of Christianity as the true ones?

“Valentinianism” existed in a range of social forms and related to other Christian communities in diverse ways. On a minimal basis, it was a mode of Christian thought or a way of understanding the Christian message with which any educated Christian could engage without necessarily joining a group. There must have been bishops and presbyters in local communities whose preaching and teaching reflected Valentinian ideas without any awareness on their part or that of their congregants
that these ideas were, as others might charge, suspect or out of “the
mainstream.” This situation might resemble a modern Christian congre-
gation in which the minister’s sermons and biblical interpretations might
be heavily influenced by Karl Barth or by liberation theology. We know
that in the 1900s a Valentinian named Florinus served as a presbyter in
the Roman Church under the non-Valentinian Bishop Victor. It is not
clear whether people recognized Florinus as a Valentinian only on the
basis of his views or because he also participated in an organized group
of Valentinians. When early Valentinians became visible as a distinct com-
munity, it was usually because they formed study groups similar to
other philosophical schools in antiquity. These groups operated along-
side and as a supplement to other Christian communities: a Christian
might worship weekly in a house church near his or her home but also
participate in meetings of study and discussion led by a Valentinian
teacher.

Valentinians incorporated their unique relationship to other Chris-
tians into their theology and reached out to them. For example, they
borrowed terminology from Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians (2:14–
15) and referred to themselves as “spiritual ones” (pneumatikoi) and to
non-Valentinian Christians as merely “animate ones” (psychikoi). Ac-
cording to Irenaeus’s account of Valentinian teachings, “animate” Chris-
tians would receive a lesser form of salvation at the end of time than the
“spiritual ones” would—but salvation nonetheless. When the spirituals
are restored to the fullness (the Valentinian version of the Gnostics’ en-
tirety), the animate will “gain repose” in a place outside of it.8 The
comprehensive Valentinian work The Tripartite Tractate, however, sug-
gests that the distinction between “animates” and “spirituals” will be
overcome in God’s final act of reconciliation: “If, in fact, we confess the
kingdom in Christ, it is for the abolishment of all diversity, inequality,
and difference. For the end will regain the form of existence of a single
one, just as the beginning was a single one.”9 Similarly, another Valen-
tinian teacher called the final consummation a “wedding banquet, which
is shared by all the saved, until all become equal and recognize one
another.”10

And indeed, Valentinians showed pastoral interest in their fellow
Christians, often inviting them to join them for advanced study and
thus eventually to become “spirituals” themselves. For example, a sur-
viving letter from the Valentinian theologian Ptolemy introduces a non-
Valentinian Christian named Flora to some basic Valentinian ideas
(ethics, the lower status of the creator god) and then invites her to study
further with him.11 The anti-Valentinian Bishop Irenaeus complained bit-
terly that Valentinians use “persuasion and rhetoric” to “attract the
simple to pursue the quest” for advanced knowledge of God and Christ.12
The Valentinians presented themselves and their teachings as the deeper
or higher meaning of whatever form of Christianity to which potential
followers adhered. Their division of Christians into “animates” and “spirit-
uals” functioned more like stages in one’s progression into acquain-
tance than as rigid, pre-determined sets of people.13

Irenaeus lamented, too, that the Valentinians “speak like us but think
differently.”14 That is, the Valentinians accepted the same scriptures and
basic doctrines as Irenaeus, but interpreted them differently, often in what
Irenaeus took to be a more metaphorical or symbolical fashion. For ex-
ample, all Christians agreed that “Christ was raised from the dead”
(Romans 6:4) and that Christians, too, would rise like him (1 Corin-
thians 15). In Irenaeus’s view, this meant that Christ rose from the grave,
body and soul, and so would Christians at the end of history: “We too
must await the time of our resurrection fixed by God.”15 According to
one Valentinian author, however, the Christian’s resurrection is his or
her gradual transcendence of the material world through contemplation
of increasingly higher realities. Resurrection does not lie in the future
but is available now: “Leave the state of dispersion and bondage,” the
author exhorts, “and then you already have resurrection.”16 A Valentinian
could affirm with fellow Christians who were not Valentinians a
shared belief in resurrection from the dead, but would have his or her
own understanding of what that means—as indeed all Christians did.
At this point no single understanding had emerged as normative. Still, the
rhetoric of some Valentinian works suggests that their authors under-
stood that they had to relate their views to other Christian ideas that
may have been more widespread. For instance, Ptolemy complained that
“many people” have misunderstood the Law of Moses, and another
Valentinian teacher remarked that “few” comprehend the true mean-
ing of resurrection.17

The Gnostics drew on the Bible for their teachings, but they did so
often by rewriting biblical narratives, especially from Genesis, in order
to correct their meaning. They seemed to create new scriptures for them-

The Reality of the Rulers appears to replace Genesis just as much as it interprets it.
Valentinians, in contrast, did not create new scriptures; rather, they were pioneers in the close exegesis of Jewish and Christian scriptures and produced some of the earliest known commentaries on biblical books. The Valentinian thinker Heracleon wrote “notes” or “comments” (hu-pomématata) on the Gospel of John and perhaps on other gospels as well. Like most other Christian teachers, Heracleon and his colleagues interpreted biblical texts allegorically or symbolically and so argued that Valentinian teachings were to be found in them. For example, in the fourth chapter of John, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well that “the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem” (John 4:21). Heracleon interprets this statement as symbolically teaching that “spiritual ones” (that is, Valentinians) worship neither created things as the pagans did (“mountain”) nor the creator god of this world as the Jews and many other Christians did (“Jerusalem”), but the higher ultimate God. Valentinian exegetes also made extensive use of Paul’s letters in explicating their theologies.

Indeed, Valentinian teachers frequently invoked the authority of Paul (and of the apostles in general) to legitimate their doctrines and their identity as teachers. As we saw in the previous chapter, Valentinian theologians asserted that Valentinus had studied with Theudas, a disciple of Paul. Followers of another Christian teacher, Basilides, an older contemporary of Valentinus, made a similar claim about their theological hero, but they traced his intellectual pedigree back to the apostle Peter through a certain Glaucias. By tracing a similar lineage to Paul, the Valentinians professed a kind of apostolic succession for themselves: Paul had transmitted his teachings to Theudas, who passed them on to Valentinus, and now these teachings have come to the students of Valentinus (and their students in turn). Ptolemy suggested to Flora that she might be “deemed worthy of the apostolic tradition, which even we have received by succession . . . at least if, like good rich soil that has received fertile seeds, you bear fruit.” One Valentinian author wrote, “The father anointed the son; and the son anointed the apostles, and the apostles anointed us.” Another attributed a prayer for authority and enlightenment to “Paul the Apostle.” The claim to special connection with an apostle through a chain of successors functioned as a powerful bid for authority and recognition as having the most authentic Christian teaching. Ptolemy’s hope that Flora would prove “worthy of the apostolic tradition” indicates that at least portions of this tradition were reserved for more advanced Christians.

Baptism and the Eucharist played important roles in Valentinian spirituality. Their references to baptism suggest that their understanding of Christian initiation contained the same elements one finds in baptism in other Christian groups: a period of instruction, one or more anointings with oil, exorcisms, immersion, and laying on of hands. Valentinians must have undergone baptism in ordinary congregations or practiced their own baptism, which nonetheless did not differ much if at all from that of other Christians. Whichever was the case, baptism could not be effective without the instruction and growth in knowledge and virtue that Valentinian teaching provided: “It is not the bath alone that liberates, but also the acquaintance: Who were we? What have we become? Where were we? Into what place have we been thrown? Where are we going? From what are we ransomed? What is generation? What is regeneration?” Valentinian sources suggest that they may have observed some rituals that were specific to them. For example, one group of Valentinians may have developed their own ritual for death long before other Christians did. Several sources mention a ritual called “bridal chamber.” “Bridal chamber” appears to refer to the potential reunion of the human soul with its angelic counterpart or spiritual alter ego. Scholars disagree, however, about whether “bridal chamber” in fact refers to a distinct ritual or represents a Valentinian understanding of the meaning of baptism.

The Valentinian movement, then, had a complex relationship with other Christian groups. It featured independent study circles that worked like philosophical schools and supplemented worship and participation in non-Valentinian house churches. And yet some house churches may have had clergy whose theology was Valentinian, even if the house church did not have a “Valentinian” identity. Valentinian teachers reflected this ambiguous position. They claimed special authority inherited from the apostle Paul, presented their teachings as the hidden or symbolic meanings of generally shared Jewish and Christian scriptures, and reflected on the differences between Valentinian or advanced Christians (“spiritual ones”) and their non-Valentinian brothers and sisters or less advanced Christians (“animate ones”). Evidence suggests that during the third century and later, Valentinian Christianity increasingly took on the character of a fully independent network of churches, similar to that of the Marcionites. For example, in the late fourth century a Christian mob attacked a Valentinian worship building—a sign that Valentinians by this point were clearly distinct from other Christians.
Bishops and Presbyters, Not Teachers: Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 155–ca. 202)

As we have seen repeatedly, Irenaeus was among the most prominent critics of the Gnostics, but he considered the Valentinians the greater threat to his own congregation. Their more overt Christian character and their pastoral interest in other Christians made them, to his mind, wolves in sheep’s clothing (Matthew 7:15). Irenaeus’s Christian community in Lyons had endured a period of harsh persecution, in which it had lost its previous bishop. Irenaeus was eager to protect his depleted and fragile Church from what he saw as additional harm from false Christians. His work exemplifies several strategies for differentiating one’s own community and beliefs from those of other Christians, including a claim to a more institutional and public apostolic succession, a two-fold Christian Bible interpreted through a “rule of faith,” heresiology, and the role of the bishop.

In writing his magnum opus Detection and Overthrow of Gnosis Falsely So-Called, Irenaeus took over Justin Martyr’s heresiological model, which we examined in the last chapter. Irenaeus claimed that his work was even more effective against the Valentinians than that of his predecessors (AH 4.30.2), and in fact his book proved so popular that Christian scribes stopped copying Justin’s Against All the Schools of Thought That Have Arisen, which now appeared obsolete. Irenaeus elaborated on Justin’s concept of a chain of heretical teachers and groups that originated in Simon Magus. Unlike Justin the independent philosopher, however, Irenaeus the bishop portrayed the episcopate as the holy counterpart to the demonic succession of heretics. True bishops, Irenaeus claimed, could trace their lineage back to (at least) one of the original apostles. As an example, he provided such a genealogy for the bishops of Rome, for that Church “is greatest, most ancient, and known to all” (AH 3.1.3). We should remember that it was the followers of Basilides and Valentinus, heretics in the eyes of Irenaeus, who pioneered this strategy of legitimation. Irenaeus adopted it, but with a polemical twist. While the Valentinians appear to have presented at least part of the apostolic tradition that they received as reserved for advanced Christians (“spiritual ones”), Irenaeus insisted that the tradition that the apostles transmitted through the bishops was fully public and accessible to all.

Irenaeus stressed this difference between a teaching given to all Christians and a secret or reserved tradition of more advanced teachings. If the apostles had any “secret teachings,” he argued, they surely would have taught them to their successors, the bishops. In fact, however, the very notion of a more hidden apostolic tradition turned the apostles into hypocrites. His opponents “claim that the apostles hypocritically made their teaching according to the capacity of the hearers and gave answers according to the prejudices of the inquirers . . . Thus the Lord and the apostles expressed their teaching not truthfully but hypocritically, as each could hold it” (AH 3.3.1; 3.5.1). What the Gnostics and Valentinians would doubtless view as the normal pedagogy of a teacher (starting with basic concepts and moving toward more advanced ideas), Irenaeus condemned as hypocrisy. Instead, the bishop asserted, the true apostolic tradition is “manifest in the whole world” and “easy to receive from the Church” (AH 3.3.1; 3.4.1).

Like the Valentinians and Clement of Alexandria (to whom I shall turn next), Irenaeus thought of Christian authority in terms of teachers and a school. The apostles, he said, passed on to the bishops “their own position of teaching” (AH 3.3.1). For Irenaeus, however, this “position of teaching” consisted not simply of a set of doctrines or ideas; rather, it was an office, the bishop, and tied to an institution, the Church. Therefore, Irenaeus pointedly did not call bishops “teachers”; he reserved that term and its connotation of independence and suspicious originality for leaders of groups that he opposed. As Virginia Burrus writes, for Irenaeus, “heretics have teachers; the orthodox have bishops and presbyters. Heretics have free-floating, and hence mutable, doctrines; the orthodox preserve their tradition within an institutional context.”

In response to Gnostic retellings of the Septuagint and to Marcion’s rejection of it, Irenaeus promoted an embryonic biblical canon, consisting of two parts, an Old and a New Testament, with four gospels. The Bible, Irenaeus said, contains two covenants. The first may be “old” and more suited for “slaves” and the “undisciplined,” and the second may be “new” and meant for “children” and “free” people—but they come from the same God, who adjusted his revelation to the progression of humanity (AH 4.9). He accused various groups of relying too much on a single gospel; for example, the Valentinians used the Gospel of John excessively (he claimed). In fact, Christians must use all four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), and not others (AH 3.11.7–9). Like the
Valentians, Irenaeus interpreted the Old Testament allegorically in order to find his own views in it—in his case, to demonstrate the unity of the Old and New Testaments and the single identity of their God. He argued that the Bible's overarching "plot line" or "project" (hypothesis) was not the Gnostics' myth of cosmic devolution and return but the story of the single God of Israel's relationship with humanity, summarized in a "rule of faith." The rule anticipated and/or reflected creeds that converts would learn when they became Christians:

The Church, which is dispersed throughout the entire world and to the ends of the earth, received from the apostles and their disciples this faith in one God the Father Almighty, "who made heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in them" [Exodus 20:11], and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, incarnate for our salvation, and in the Holy Spirit, who predicted through the prophets the dispensations of God, the coming, the birth from the Virgin, the passion, the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension of the beloved Jesus Christ our Lord in the flesh into the heavens, and his coming from the heavens in the glory of the Father to "recapitulate all things" [Ephesians 1:10] and to raise up all flesh of the human race ... and that he might execute a just judgment on all and send to eternal fire "the spiritual powers of wickedness" [Ephesians 6:12], the lying and apostate angels, and people who are impious, unjust, wicked, and blasphemous, while on the contrary he might give incorruptible life as a reward to the just and equitable who keep his commandments and persevere in his love, some from the beginning, others since their conversion, and surround them with eternal glory (AH 1.10.1).

Christ himself had delivered this rule to his apostles, who transmitted it to the bishops who followed them; thus, the rule was the same throughout the one Church (AH 1.10; 3.2-4).

Irenaeus admitted that, in contrast to this clear rule, the Scriptures are not always unambiguous; rather, some things are written "in parables." The Christian exegete may "work out" the meaning of such passages as long as he "conforms to the general scheme (hypothesis) of the faith" (AH 1.10.3). In fact, given the slipperiness of the Scriptures (that is, that Gnostics and Valentinians and Marcionites could all find their views in them), it is no surprise that Irenaeus privileged the rule and the apostolic tradition over the Scriptures: Christians do just fine if they have received the true faith handed down from the apostles through the bishops, but lack the Scriptures (AH 3.4.2). Irenaeus faced a multitude of rival Christianities, not just the Gnostics, and emphasized the unity and consistency of the one Church in contrast to the multiplicity and diversity of his opponents. His narrative of a decline from an original period of unity and truth paralleled the Gnostic myth of a fall from an original spiritual unity. Justin's heresiological model of multiple heretical teachers originating in a single source (Simon Magus) facilitated this representation.

In Irenaeus's program, the bishop was responsible for enforcing with practical measures the truth that he received from the apostles. Differentiation from rival Christian groups was only one factor in the emergence of the bishop as the single leader of Christians in a city, but it was an important one. Bishop Victor of Rome (ca.189–199) may serve as one example of the Irenaeus paradigm in action. As we saw in the previous chapter, before Victor the diverse Christian groups in Rome usually tolerated one another and expressed their unity by sending tokens of the Eucharistic elements to one another. Victor at first acted within this tradition, recognizing representatives of the New Prophecy movement ("Montanism") as legitimate Christians and the Valentinian Florinus as one of his presbyters. The existence of multiple house churches hindered any simple bilateral division of "orthodox" from "others." But Irenaeus wrote to the presbyter Florinus from Lyons and chastised him for teachings that were "inconsistent with the church": "The presbyters before us, those who went around especially with the apostles, did not transmit such teachings to you." Irenaeus understood that the Valentinian Florinus was not separate from the wider Christian community in Rome, for Irenaeus contrasted him with "heretics outside the church." In turn, Irenaeus wrote to Bishop Victor and exhorted him to "expel" Florinus's writings as "blasphemy," particularly dangerous for Christians because Florinus could claim to be "one of you," that is, one of Victor's circle. It seems that Victor did fire Florinus, for the later Church historian Eusebius refers to him as "fallen from the presbytery of the church." The Christian teacher Praxexas, recently arrived from Asia Minor, likewise urged the Roman bishop to withdraw fellowship from the adherents of the New Prophecy. Victor did this as well and cut off fellowship also with another Christian teacher, Theodotus, the shoemaker. Because the bishop's authority was closely tied to the Eucharist over which he presided, the withdrawal of communion served him as a primary means of establishing boundaries between his own and rival Christian groups.
Irenaeus, however, did not try to eliminate every kind of diversity from the churches; in another exchange with Victor, he urged the Roman bishop to tolerate differences among Christians. In this case, Roman Christians who came from Asia Minor celebrated Easter and the fast that preceded it on a schedule different from that of other Christians in Rome, including Victor. Bishop Victor threatened to withdraw fellowship from Christians who followed the traditions of Asia Minor unless they conformed to his practice. Irenaeus, however, tried to dissuade Victor from this course of action. Recognizing that the Christians from Asia Minor were observing a tradition that dated back to the earliest years of Christianity, Irenaeus argued that it was customary to allow for “particular practice” in certain areas, concluding that “disagreement about the fast confirms agreement about the faith.”

Irenaeus, then, valued conformity to the rule of faith more than uniformity in ritual practice, particularly when differences in practice enjoyed the precedent of the ancient tradition that he valued so highly.

Moreover, Irenaeus’s own thought did not differ as fundamentally from the teachings of the Gnostics and the Valentinians as he would have liked his readers to think. We have noted already that Irenaeus was just as willing as his opponents were to interpret biblical passages allegorically to support his views; he just used a different overall myth as the framework for his exegetical decisions. Like all the Christians we have met so far, including the Gnostics, Irenaeus did not believe in simply one God. Rather, he distinguished between the ultimate God, the Father, who is “uncreated, beyond grasp, invisible,” and two clearly lower manifestations of God: the Word or Son, who “establishes, that is, works bodily and consolidates being,” and the Spirit, who “disposes and shapes the various powers.”

Like the Gnostics’ Invisible Spirit, Irenaeus’s Father is “invisible and inaccessible to creatures,” and thus “it is through the Son that those who are to approach God must have access to the Father.” Again, the Father cannot be measured and must be revealed only by the Son, who (unlike the Father) can be known (AH 4.20.1, 6).

So, too, there are multiple other beings that exist between this divine triad and humanity: “The earth is encompassed by seven heavens, in which dwell Powers and Angels and Archangels, giving homage to the Almighty God who created all things.” Irenaeus gives the names of the seven heavens, beginning with Wisdom, and continuing with Understanding, Counsel, Fortitude, Knowledge, Godliness, and Fear of the Spirit. Certainly Irenaeus’s divine realm and created cosmos were less elaborate and populated than those of the Gnostics or Valentinians, but he just as clearly belonged to the same intellectual milieu as they, one in which human knowledge of an inaccessible highest God required the mediation of multiple divine beings.

The Teacher Is the Real Presbyter:
Clement of Alexandria (ca. 160–215)

In Alexandria, Clement and Origen resembled Valentinian teachers in that they offered small groups of students the opportunity to advance spiritually in the study of Christian scriptures and doctrines, but each endeavored to differentiate himself from his competitors and to stake out some relationship to the emerging networks of episcopally led communities. Clement, for example, had to differentiate himself on at least two fronts. On the one hand, he portrayed his “domesticated gnōsis” (not Clement’s term) as more faithful to original Christian doctrine than that offered by competing teachers like the Gnostics and Valentinians, whom he called heretics. On the other hand, he defended his philosophical speculation and advanced instruction of true “Gnostics” against Christians whom he described as “those who are called orthodox” and who insisted on “the bare faith alone.”

Although Eusebius later assimilated him to church structures by portraying him as the head of a catechetical school formally tied to the episcopate, Clement more likely operated as a fully independent Christian teacher. As we saw in Chapter 2, he challenged Gnostics and Valentinians at their own game by calling his ideal Christian “our Gnostic” or “the Gnostic, properly speaking” and referring to his competitors as “falsely named” Gnostics. He countered the Gnostic use of genealogical and racial language to define themselves through his own use of creative and kinship metaphors to authorize his own teachings and to delegitimize those of his rivals. Also like the Valentinians, Clement claimed to receive a special tradition of teaching from the apostles. Unlike Irenaeus, Clement did not trace this apostolic tradition through bishops, nor did he depict it as publicly available to any and all Christians. “Gnōsis itself,” he argued, “has come down by succession to a few people, transmitted by the apostles in unwritten form” (Str. 6.7.61.3).

Echoing Ptolemy the Valentinian by calling transmitted teachings “seeds,” Clement claimed that his teachers “preserved the true tradition of the blessed doctrine in direct line from Peter, James, John, and Paul, the holy
apostles, child inheriting from father . . . and came with God's help to plant in us those ancestral and apostolic seeds” (Str. 1.1.11.3).66 Clement pointedly did not trace his academic lineage to a single apostle, but to four, and did not name the teachers who intervened between these apostles and himself, thereby portraying himself, in contrast to his Valentinian and other competitors, as possessing not a particular strain of Christian teaching, but the fullness of apostolic teaching, transmitted in an academic succession beyond scrutiny.47

Clement exhibited an attitude toward Christian communities led by bishops and presbyters that resembled that of the Valentinians in its ambivalent openness. Professing his adherence to the teachings of the wider Church, Clement nonetheless offered his students a form of secret knowledge passed down not through bishops but through his unnamed teachers (Str. 1.1.11–13). He made use of a range of sacred literature that belies the notion of a closed canon.48 Moreover, that sacred literature was filled with what Clement (like Irenaeus) called “parables.” The parabolic enigmas of the Scriptures, Clement said, are not accessible to everyone, but only to “the elect among human beings, those who have been chosen out of faith for gnōsis” (Str. 6.15.126.2). That is, just as the Valentinian teachers asserted that “animate” Christians could advance to become “spiritual” ones under their guidance, Clement could lead students from faith to gnōsis through their study of the Scriptures under his direction.

In turn, Clement very seldom referred to bishops or other clergy and their communities. He pointedly claimed that the person who “has lived perfectly and gnostically” is “really a presbyter of the church” even if “he has not been ordained by human beings” (Str. 6.13.106.1–2).49 Clement’s pamphlet Who Is the Rich Man Who Is Being Saved? explained how a wealthy Christian could achieve virtue and salvation without divesting himself of all his wealth (as Mark 10:17–31 seems to suggest). Clement encouraged the rich Christian to submit to “some man of God as a trainer and guide,” that is, to follow a teacher such as Clement. He followed that exhortation with a cautionary tale in which a bishop failed to provide proper guidance to a spirited young man.50 Clement’s study circle provided the surest path to salvation and to spiritual perfection as a true Gnostic. Clement wrote at a time when Demetrius, the first single bishop of Alexandria, was emerging and claiming authority. Clement probably allied himself with Demetrius’s worshipping community, but he never mentioned him in his works.

Still, Clement insisted on fidelity to the wider Christian community that he called the Church. The Church, he said, is the Mother of Christians, just as God is their Father.51 Like Irenaeus, Clement argued that proper interpretation of the Scriptures is governed by what he called “the ecclesiastical norm (kanōn)” or “the norm of truth” (Str. 6.15.125.2–3; 7.16.94.5). Unlike Irenaeus, however, Clement does not identify this “norm” or “rule” with a creedal narrative of specific teachings, but with vaguer principles of comprehensiveness in the use of the Scriptures, adherence to the original teaching of Jesus, and not following one’s own peculiar interests, intellectual or otherwise. Those who participate in heresies, he said, “adulterate the truth and steal the norm of the church by gratifying their own desires and vanity and by deceiving their neighbors” (Str. 7.16.105.5). Their “human assemblies” originated later than “the catholic church” (Str. 7.17.106.3). The Church is one, but the heresies are numerous, identified by the names of their founders (Valentinians) or their places of origin or whatever (Str. 7.17). His opponents, Clement said, do not teach “the mysteries of ecclesiastical gnōsis” (Str. 7.16.97.4). When he makes such claims, Clement sounds a great deal like Irenaeus.

As an independent teacher rather than a bishop, however, Clement occupied a more ambiguous position than Irenaeus. He shared the commitment to gnōsis, the higher and more immediate knowledge of God and what is truly real, which animated the Gnostic school of thought and the Valentinian school. Moral and intellectual training under a trustworthy teacher like Clement made such gnōsis possible, for he had received higher teachings from a succession of inspired teachers extending back to the apostles. And yet Clement differentiated himself from his Gnostic and Valentinian rivals, who offered that same kind of moral and intellectual guidance, in part by claiming his own greater fidelity to an allegedly more widely shared tradition. Clement presented himself as offering the advanced and esoteric gnosis that other teachers did, but one tied more closely to Christians like Irenaeus. Paul the Apostle, Clement argued, taught that “gnōsis, which is the perfection of faith, advances beyond catechesis, in accordance with the magnitude of the Lord’s teaching and the ecclesiastical norm” (Str. 6.18.165.1). Clement offered that combination of adherence to “the ecclesiastical norm” and something more, something that reflected the “magnitude” of what Jesus really taught—“ecclesiastical gnōsis.”
Presbyter and Teacher:
Origen (ca. 185–ca. 251)

Origen clearly presented himself as a man of the Church and eventually joined the clergy, but he, too, placed a high value on the Christian's advancement in study and discipline. As a teacher of advanced Christian thought, Origen, like Clement, had to differentiate himself both from rival teachers of differing philosophical commitments and from the ordinary Christian assembly. On the one hand, Origen became the target of a bishop's attempt to control diversity and to consolidate authority. He articulated a model of authority that separated legitimate teaching from clerical office. On the other hand, he criticized "heretics" and promoted the Church's "rule" as a limit to biblical interpretation.

After the martyrdom of his father, the brilliant young Origen made his way into the salons of wealthy and intellectually inclined Christians in Alexandria, an environment dominated by "heretical" teachers, mainly Gnostics and Valentinians. Origen engaged these rivals in intellectual give-and-take but would not worship with them. He worked, particularly in his On First Principles, to create a Christian "body" (sōma) of thought that could compete with those of the Gnostics and Valentinians. It was his answer to the kind of comprehensive statements of Christian teaching that one finds in the Gnostics' Secret Book According to John or the Valentinians' Tripartite Treatise. Like Irenaeus, Origen relied on a rule of faith—"the teaching of the church, handed down in unbroken succession from the apostles"—to confront the "conflicting opinions" held by professed Christians. Irenaeus had stated that the rule gives Christian scholars some latitude in the interpretation of puzzling biblical passages, as long as they conform their readings to the rule. Origen took this principle further: he believed that the apostles deliberately left some teachings vague or unsubstantiated so that "lovers of wisdom," teachers like himself and his students, would have material with which to speculate and so "display the fruit of their ability" (FP pref.2–3). For Origen the rule functioned both as a limit to theological speculation and as a springboard for it.

Like the Gnostic and Valentinian myths, Origen's Christian myth narrated a fall from an original state of spiritual unity into a material universe marred by evil, concluding with a return of all things to God. Origen, however, did not assign creation to an imperfect God, and he placed free will at the center of his narrative. In agreement with his Gnostic and Valentinian rivals, Origen described the ultimate God as "incomprehensible and immeasurable," a "simple and wholly mental existence." So, too, like the Gnostics, Origen taught that "there is a certain affinity between the [human] mind and God, of whom the mind is an intellectual image, and that by reason of this fact the mind, especially if it is purified and separated from bodily matter, is able to have some perception of the divine nature" (FP 1.1.5–7). In other words, the human intellect is patterned after God, and we can gain acquaintance with God if we discipline our bodies and engage in study. We know God through His Son, the Word or Wisdom, whose relationship to the Father is "an eternal and everlasting begetting, as brightness is begotten from light." This "birth from the Father is as it were an act of his will proceeding from the mind." Origen insisted that the Son and, in turn, the Holy Spirit are not similar to the Gnostics' and Valentinians' "emanations," which "split the divine nature into parts . . . dividing God the Father" (FP 1.2.4, 6). Still, Origen's vocabulary for the generation of these divine persons—"begetting," "image"—echoed that of his rivals, even as his divine Trinity represented a much simpler multiform divinity.

So, too, for Origen, our bodies did not constitute our original and essential selves; rather, all created rational beings originated as minds, entities of pure reason alone. This was the past of every human being born on earth, as well as of angels, demons, and the heavenly creatures. These rational beings originally enjoyed unity with each other and God through contemplation of the Word, but they all fell away from love of God and unity with him by their own free turning away. They cooled in their affection for God to varying degrees. The diverse bodies that they now have, ranging from the bright and ethereal to the dull and the heavy, reflect the distance that they declined from God and are suited to each being's particular need for moral reformation. Our bodies, then, are, as the Gnostics imagined, additions to our immaterial selves and the result of a fall, but they do not, as the Gnostics thought, enslave us to cosmic forces but provide us with an opportunity for education in virtue. We learn to be virtuous by learning to control our bodies, which exacerbate our vulnerability to passions such as lust and anger. Our bodies' resurrection and eventual transformation will reflect our moral and intellectual progress, and in fact all rational beings will recover the lost original unity with God and each other. The mind returns to God through its own free will, guided by God's pedagogy of love and chastisement. In
its general plot and many of its central themes—fall, recovery, and contemplation—Origen’s myth represented a brilliant adaptation of the earlier Christian myths that he denounced as heretical.

Just as First Principles resembled a Valentinian treatise like Tripartite Tractate, Origen more often presented his views in another way that his Valentinian rivals did—in scriptural commentaries filled with allegorical exegetis. In his Commentary on John, Origen quoted and refuted interpretations that the Valentinian teacher Hermacleon had offered in his own similar work, and it is possible that Origen’s use of the commentary genre reflected the influence of Hermacleon and others. Origen did not dismiss Hermacleon’s readings out of hand; he could praise one of Hermacleon’s cleverer interpretations as “very powerful and ingenious.” But Origen much more often rebuked him for disparaging the Old Testament and its God, for proffering interpretations that did not appear substantiated by the wording of the text, for failing to consult passages from other biblical books to clarify the possible references of words and phrases in John, and for introducing doctrines that conflicted with the Church’s “rule.” For example, he criticized Hermacleon’s interpretation of John 4:21, which we noted earlier, for violating “the rule followed by the majority in the church.” Other allegorical readers he criticized for simple lack of expertise: they were “unable to define precisely a simple ambiguity.” Of course, not reading the Bible allegorically could be equally dangerous. Elsewhere Origen condemned Jews and Christian “heretics” who did not read the Old Testament “according to the spiritual meaning but according to the bare letter” and so reached unacceptable theological conclusions. For example, Marcion mistakenly interpreted the God of the Old Testament to be literally as anger-filled as he appears and thus erroneously concluded that he was not the Father of Jesus Christ (FP 4.2.2). But in the case of allegorists such as Hermacleon, the primary contrast Origen drew between himself and “heretical” readers was his adherence to the Church’s rule; without such adherence, an exegete such as Hermacleon simply interpreted incorrectly.

Clement had worked as an independent teacher, professing loyalty to a wider Church whose leadership seldom appeared in his works, but Origen’s relationship to worshipping communities of Christians became both more formal and more complex. Origen’s early interactions with rival Valentinian teachers indicates the diversity of Alexandrian Christianity, but during the same period that Bishop Victor was taking measures against “heretics” in Rome, Bishop Demetrius began to emerge as a strong leader in Alexandria. It seems that Demetrius at first welcomed the young Origen’s efforts to refute Valentinians and others and to offer an alternative Christian education to theirs; the bishop endorsed Origen’s school as an appropriate setting for new Christians to learn about the faith. But Demetrius’s efforts to consolidate the bishop’s authority to enforce doctrine and practice in the city eventually brought him into conflict with Origen’s more speculative and free spirit. Origen did not restrict his teaching to elementary instruction for new converts, as Demetrius envisioned, but he organized the school with two levels, including an advanced tier for students who pursued the same kind of higher knowledge that Clement had taught. Origen’s fame brought him invitations to lecture in foreign locations, and during one trip to Palestine, the bishop of Caesarea Maritima ordained him a presbyter. This action, along with a rumor that during a lecture in Athens Origen stated that the devil would be saved, led Demetrius around 230 to convene a group of bishops and have him expelled from the Church in Alexandria. Origen then relocated to Caesarea, where he set up a new school and preached as a presbyter.

As a teacher and a preacher, Origen sought to address a variety of constituencies, ranging from ordinary churchgoers who could not read, to the educated (and not so educated) bishops who sought his theological expertise, to the aristocratic patrons who paid for his library and teams of scribes. He did not hesitate to use his learning and eloquence to aid bishops in combating “heresies”; at least twice, synods of bishops invited Origen to interrogate a fellow bishop suspected of heretical ideas. In the wake of his conflict with Demetrius and enjoying the support of the bishop in Caesarea, Origen articulated a model of authority akin to those of Valentinus and Clement: the ideal Christian leader received the gift (charisma) of insight into the higher meaning of the Scriptures. Origen agreed with Clement that ordination as a bishop or presbyter did not coincide with teaching authority. He observed that the spiritually gifted person, the real bishop, was not always the visible bishop. The true priests, he said, are “those who are really dedicated to the divine word and to the worship of God.” Unlike Clement, however, Origen did not invoke a succession of teachers going back to the apostles as the conduit of either secret doctrines or intellectual authority. Instead, just as Valentinus seemed to suggest, the gift of insight came directly to the individual from God and bore fruit in the scholar’s moral purity and exegetical labors. Origen certainly believed in esoteric or
higher teachings that were available only to more advanced Christians, but gifted scholars derived these teachings directly from the Bible. Still, as a presbyter Origen found a place in the Church of Caesarea and was able to bring into or alongside the episcopally led community a conception of charismatic authority that challenged claims based solely on office. The bishop has grave responsibilities, Origen recognized, but the true leadership of the Church consists of the spiritual elite who interpret the Scriptures and convey their message of salvation to others.\(^{62}\)

### From Strategies of Self-Differentiation to Establishing and Enforcing Orthodoxy

When the colleague of Abercius confronted the New Prophecy among the Christians in Galatia, he “spoke out for days on end in the church about these matters, and replied to every argument that they put forward.” This Christian teacher’s refutation of the teachings of New Prophecy so impressed the local presbyters that they asked him to leave with them a written summary of what he had said. He could not do so then, but the treatise that he dedicated to Abercius belatedly fulfilled their request.\(^{63}\) For presbyters seeking to establish unity and conformity in their communities, a good teacher and well-made arguments were valuable things.

As they sought to invent and reinvent Christianity in the second and third centuries, Christian leaders tried to sort out what proper teaching was and who did it. In response to Gnostic pseudopigraphy, genealogical rhetoric, and theological claims, they developed a repertoire of strategies of self-differentiation: (1) modes of personalized teaching authority, expressed in claims either to visionary insight or to a succession of teachers or bishops, sometimes articulated in procreative or agricultural metaphors; (2) embryonic canons of the Bible, usually consisting of Old and New Testaments; (3) allegorical methods of scriptural reading, which articulated the unity of the bipartite Bible and enabled the elaboration of speculative ideas; (4) formulation of a “rule” of truth or faith as a limit to and/or inspiration for such reading and speculation; (5) heresiology as a means of trivializing a range of opponents and bolstering one’s own claim to single and original truth; (6) withdrawal of communion. It is important to notice that not only Christians that scholars call “proto-orthodox” deployed these strategies; so did the so-called “losers” in the “battle for orthodoxy.” The claims of Basilides and Valentinus to apostolic succession preceded those of Irenaeus. It may have been Marcion who withdrew from communion with his fellow Christians in Rome.

It is difficult to measure the success of such strategies in the pre-Constantinian era. Scholars have no reliable statistics for the numbers of Christians in different groups, and ancient authors can claim that “heretics” are numerous or few, depending on the hortatory point that they wish to make. It is telling, however, that Gnostic works that we know come from the third century (Zostrianos, The Foreigner, Marsanes) are in conversation less with the Septuagint and distinctively Christian themes and more with contemporary Platonist discussions, and indeed it is in the context of competition with Plotinus’s circle that we hear of them around 250.\(^{64}\) By this time the lines between “Christianity,” “Judaism,” and traditional modes of philosophy and worship had become clearer, thanks to factors that were both internal and external. Internally, as we have seen, increasing diversity among Christians encouraged sharper definitions of what it meant to be a “true” Christian. Externally, persecution by the Roman government forced the issue of who was really a Christian rather than a Jew or a follower of other traditional religions. The myths taught by Valentinian theologians and by Origen retained some of the most compelling features of the Gnostic myth in much more explicitly Christian packages. The Gnostics had probably lost a lot of ground to these alternative modes of Christian gnosis long before the conversion of Constantine.

And yet the multilateral efforts at self-differentiation in which the Gnostics and other groups played a prominent role did not produce a single “proto-orthodox” mode of piety or spiritual formation, but a variety of such. As much as an Irenaeus and an Origen shared, the striking differences in their theological visions and conceptions of authority complicate any attempt to place them on one side of any binary picture of the “proto-orthodox” arrayed against the Gnostics, the Valentinians, and so on. If the construction of a “Gnosticism” obscured the characters of the persons and groups assigned to it, likewise the category “proto-orthodox” can homogenize and so distort the diversity of pre-Constantinian Christianity. That diversity persisted into the fourth century and later, at times suppressed through anti-heretical measures but at times supported through, for example, the eventual embrace of monasticism. Although Irenaeus and others hoped to eliminate diversity and establish a single Church with a single truth, their efforts in fact
contributed to the rich multiplicity of the imperial Christian culture that emerged in late antiquity.

The strategies that Irenaeus and other bishops employed did succeed, however, in creating boundaries, networks, and precedents that laid the basis for the universal or “catholic” Church that the bishops and Roman emperors after Constantine sought to create. During the second and third centuries, the practice of having a single bishop to oversee all the churches in a city (the monarchical episcopate) spread throughout the empire, in part to ensure unity and uniformity within and between Christian communities. Bishops, we have seen, portrayed themselves as guarantors of the sole tradition of proper belief and practice (the “rule of faith”), which they claimed was endangered by the speculations of independent philosophers or teachers (persons like Clement of Alexandria or Origen). Such speculations, they feared, could lead to such outright “heresies” as the Gnostic sect and the Valentinian school. Often drawn from the elite strata of society, bishops began to function in ways similar to patrons in Roman society. They dispensed spiritual benefits to ordinary believers through the sacraments and material benefits through a welfare system. In turn, they represented their followers before God and at times before earthly governors. The withdrawal of such benefits, excommunication, was the ultimate punishment available to the bishop in his effort to control deviance within his community. Such deviance, the bishop knew, would offend the divine Judge when he and his flock stood before him.65

Christians began to believe that unity and uniformity not only should characterize each individual congregation but also should prevail between congregations, as was fitting of a religion that claimed to be “universal” (in Greek, katholikos). Some individual bishops, especially of major Christian centers, claimed the authority to correct other bishops on their own. Drawing on the apostolic example of the Jerusalem meeting that I discussed in Chapter 4, bishops controlled diversity among themselves collectively through regional meetings (“councils” or “synods”). At these meetings a bishop of questionable orthodoxy might be publicly interrogated by a learned theologian, not always a bishop, and brought thereby to see the errors of his way of thinking. Such was the case when Bishop Beryllus of Bostra denied that Christ existed as a divine being before he became incarnate in Jesus. A synod of bishops summoned Origen and other theologians to question Beryllus, who came to see the error of his ways.66 But in the case of a stubborn defendant, the gathered bishops could expel him and name a replacement in his see. When the bishop of Antioch, Paul of Samosata, refused to give up possession of the church buildings after a synod deposed him, Christians petitioned the Emperor Aurelian, who ordered that the civil authorities forcibly transfer control of the buildings to the Christians who were in communion with the bishops in Rome and Italy.67 If councils of bishops in different regions disagreed on a major issue, as did bishops in North Africa and Italy on rebaptism of schismatics in the 250s, it was not clear how such a difference ought to be resolved, although participants believed it should be.

Constantine, then, when he became an engaged supporter of Christianity in 312, inherited both an ancient Roman tradition of suppressing offensive religious practices to ensure a good relationship with the divine and a more recent Christian tradition of controlling diversity through the episcopate and its councils. Constantine himself appears to have been comfortable with a vague and inclusive monotheism to which Christians and “pagans” (and Jews?) could adhere. When Christians engaged in an international dispute over the Alexandrian Arius’s teaching about the divine status of the Word, Constantine expressed exasperation that they quarreled about such “small and utterly trivial” matters.68 Such was not the attitude of the newly empowered bishops, and the emperor soon found himself involved in limiting Christian diversity. For example, when he wished to bestow imperial patronage on the Christians of North Africa and to grant exemptions from costly civic offices to their clergy, he had to choose between two rival Churches, the Donatists and the Caecilianists. He opted for the latter on the basis that they were in communion with the bishops in Rome and Italy.69 This direction of imperial patronage and clerical exemptions to one group or another fostered conformity across geographical regions.

Constantine sponsored and enforced the decisions of the Council of Nicaea in 325. This meeting represented a significant advance in establishing and enforcing an international orthodoxy. As an explicitly (if not actually) “ecumenical” (worldwide) council, it claimed an authority superior to that of more regional councils, which had differed on the orthodoxy of Arius and his supporters. The emperor paid for the meeting and presided at its opening.70 The results included the adoption of a creed, a successor to the rules promoted by Irenaeus, Origen, and others, to which clergy were required to subscribe. The full extent of Constantine’s involvement in the bishops’ deliberations is a matter of dispute,
but he enforced the council’s decisions by sending into exile those bishops who refused to comply. In accord with the long-standing Christian antipathy to internal diversity, the first objects of state religious control after Constantine were “heretics.” Exile was the primary coercive measure available to emperors after Constantine, but by the turn of the fifth century heretics also faced imprisonment, heavy fines, and the confiscation of their places of worship.  

These measures to create a single orthodox Church in the fourth and later centuries were, as I have said, never entirely successful. Diversity and conflict characterized Christianity throughout the late ancient period—and beyond. Nonetheless, the attempt to create and maintain orthodoxy did not emerge as an entirely new project with the conversion of Constantine. Rather, bishops like Irenaeus and teachers like Origen laid the basis for it in their struggles with Gnostics, Valentinians, Marcionites, and others whom they considered false Christians. There may not have been a “Church” or a “Gnosticism” in the second century, when we have been told “the Church rejected Gnosticism.” But the strategies of self-differentiation that bishops, Gnostics, and others employed as they sought to legitimate their own teachings and refute those of rivals helped to create the idea of a single Christianity and the eclipse of alternatives like that of The Gospel of Judas.

So did the Gnostics lose the horse race or battle in ancient Christianity after all? Or might we more charitably say that, simply in sociological terms, their attempt to invent Christianity resulted in a “failed” religious movement? As one scholar pointedly remarks, “If Christians today sing ‘How Great Thou Art,’ most do not have in mind the Great Seth.” Indeed, except for a small revival movement in the late twentieth century, medieval and modern Christians have been neither Gnostics nor Valentinians nor Marcionites. But neither, we must recognize, have they really been Irenaeans or Justinians or Origenists. No forms of Christianity that existed in the second and third centuries have survived intact today; rather, they have all contributed, in greater and lesser ways, to the ongoing development of Christianities. Traces of Gnostic thought and practice persisted in transformed modes. For example, the Gnostics’ audacious creation of a comprehensive narrative of salvation from God through creation to Israelite history to Jesus and to the End provided an example that Christian theologians have followed down to the present day. Their interest in and strategies against malevolent demonic forces persisted in several Christian thinkers and became central in many forms of Christian monasticism. And their thoughtful discussions of how to gain mystical acquaintance with the God that cannot be known or described contributed to the thought of Plotinus and, through him, to later Christian mystics. The “Church” did not reject “Gnosticism,” nor did the Gnostics “lose” to “proto-orthodoxy.” Rather, the Gnostic school of thought, as small and limited as it was, played an important role in the process by which Christians, even today, continually reinvent themselves, their ideas, and their communities in light of their experience of Jesus Christ.