

REVIEWS

UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT: AN INQUIRY INTO THE CHARACTER OF EARLIEST CHRISTIANITY, by James D. G. Dunn, SCM Press, 1977, pp. 470 £12.50

As you will probably have guessed, this book is about the diversity and unity of theologies in the New Testament. Dunn's thesis is that there never was a single orthodox gospel, a complete and universally accepted interpretation of the significance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. From the very beginning there were a variety of theologies, and none of them could make an exclusive claim to be orthodox. Dunn demonstrates this diversity by examining almost every imaginable issue of faith or practice in the early Church. It is a remarkable work and the very best introduction to New Testament scholarship that I know. What about the unity? Does this theological pluralism mean that one can say anything one wants about Christ? Well, Dunn believes that underlying this diversity there is a "unifying strand" which determined the limits of acceptable belief, and that is "the unity between the historical Jesus and the exalted Christ". A theology is acceptable, therefore, if it affirms that the wandering charismatic preacher from Nazareth is one and the same as the risen Lord in whom the Father is encountered.

On the whole, Dunn's analysis of the various New Testament theologies is admirable but one wonders to what extent his map of early Christianity is, at times, determined by his own theological prejudices. One can view the diversity of the New Testament from a diversity of places, but Dunn tends to give the impression that he is surveying everything with dispassion-

ate objectivity from some scholarly cloud. For example, he sees Roman Catholicism as the offshoot of one particular branch of the early church, which he calls, naturally enough, "early catholicism", found principally in the Pastoral Epistles. I am certainly not happy with being given such a boring ancestry. He then feels compelled to exclude from any other theological tradition whatever smacks of Catholic theology, for example sacramentalism. So baptism for Paul, can be no more than the expression of "the baptisand's desire to identify himself with Christ" (p. 158), a merely symbolic gesture that has nothing fundamentally to do with one being taken up into Christ. For Dunn the only alternatives are that Paul must understand the sacraments either symbolically or magically. He tries to prove that for Paul "dying with Christ" is in no way dependent on baptism by pointing out that Paul does not always explicitly mention baptism when he talks about it. But this no more follows than does the fact that I sometimes talk about rain without explicitly mentioning the clouds prove that I believe that it can rain without there being clouds. Dunn even attempts to prove that John's gospel was written as an attack on a growing sacramentalism.

My most fundamental criticism of the book would be that in the end Dunn does not really take the diversity of the New Testament seriously enough. What really matters for him is "the unifying strand", the belief in the identity between

One has the impression that if one clings to that then one can profess whatever one likes. This is "the canon within the canon". The wonderful diversity of theologies in the New Testament seems, finally, only to be of value in so far as it demonstrates some of the different ways in which one can articulate that single central belief. "In short, the canon of the New Testament has a continuing function in that the New Testament in all its diversity still bears a constant testimony to the unifying centre. Its unity canonizes Jesus-the-man-now-exalted as the canon within the canon. Its diversity prevents us from insisting on a larger or different canon within the canon" (p. 376). This comes down to saying that since the authors of the New Testament only agree on a minimum, then it is only to this minimum that we are committed. The time has come, Dunn tells us (p. 377), to take seriously the famous saying of P. Meidelin:

"In essentials, unity,
in non-essentials, liberty,
in all things, charity".

But is it good enough to classify Paul's theology of justification by faith as a 'non-essential', or John's vision of the Incarnate Word an expendable extra merely because not every New Testament author professes them?

Now it is true that our recent insight into the diversity of New Testament theologies does confront us with all sorts of theological problems. I agree with Dunn when he says that we cannot produce a single coherent theology that will incorporate all the diverse theologies of the New Testament. It is right and proper that we should find in the Church today a genuine plurality of theologies. But I believe that Dunn is merely evading the real challenge of pluralism by taking his stand on a minimal confession of faith: if you confess that Jesus the man is the exalted Christ then you pass the test! In the end he is declaring the diversity to be of peripheral importance. Now Dunn does go on to say that we should all be prepared to accept other forms of Christianity as valid, but what does that mean? In what sense does one accept as valid a theology which professes the divinity of Christ if one then feels free to deny that divinity on the grounds that

canon"? It clearly does not mean accepting that other theology as in any sense true. I suspect that what Dunn means is that we should be tolerant of those who differ from us and that it does not really matter who is right. This liberal spirit of paternal toleration is made explicit in his treatment of the Catholic attitude to tradition. It is "acceptable" in the sense that even in the New Testament itself, in the Pastoral Epistles, we can see evidence for this same hardening of the arteries, but he pities us for feeling so bound by the past. He makes the mistake of believing that Catholics give to church traditions exactly the *same* normative value as the New Testament itself (p. 383). He compares those who value the past teachings of the Church to the "weak" in the early Church who felt bound by rabbinic traditions: "Both conservative and liberal would do well to follow Paul's advice to "weak" and "strong" (in questions of tradition) in Rom. 14:1-15:6 and I Cor. 8-10: not to attach undue importance to matters of tradition and fully to respect the opinions and practices of those who differ, with neither the conservative condemning the liberal for his exercise of liberty, nor the liberal despising the conservative for his scruples" (p. 79). It is ridiculous to regard Catholic regard for the traditions of the Church as simply equivalent to the loyalty of Jewish Christians in the early days to the pre-Christian rabbinic traditions. I admit that it can be a sign of weakness if we understand that loyalty as merely the repetition of traditional formulae as if they had forever captured the complete and perfect truth of the gospel. Catholicism can have a regard for traditional statements of the faith precisely because, in the end, it welcomes diversity and believes that the Holy Spirit is given to men in all ages. As Chesterton so rightly saw, a respect for tradition is essentially democratic: "Tradition may be defined as an extension of the franchise. Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. All democrats object to men being disqualified by the accident of birth; tradition objects to them being disqual-

ified by the accident of death" (*Orthodoxy*, p. 83). Dunn may glory in the liberal's exercise of liberty, but these "strong" could be making a tyrannical claim to an exclusive possession of the Spirit. The Catholic has to take tradition seriously because he takes Pentecost seriously, but that no more means merely repeating what was said in the past than does democracy mean slavishly repeating your neighbour's opinions.

So, Dunn rejects the possibility of an "orthodoxy" in the sense of a "final expression of Christian truth whose meaning is unequivocal". And I agree with him, but he has replaced it with a minimalist orthodoxy, an orthodoxy of the lowest common denominator. Obviously there is no space in this review to explore what a Catholic might mean by orthodoxy but I would suggest that it might be defined not so much in terms of the minimum that one must say as the maximum that one cannot deny. One is orthodox not so much by saying the right thing as by refusing to say the wrong thing. No theology is capable of including all the insights of the New Testament, and in that sense every theology is inadequate. Some of us may be primarily inspired by Paul or by John or even, sad to say, by the Pastoral Epistles. That is fine provided that our interpretation of the New Testament does not explicitly exclude or refuse what it is unable to appropriate. An orthodox theol-

ogy is thus by definition open beyond itself and can make no claim to be final or complete. It is surely a characteristic of heresy to refuse whatever does not fit into its system. The great conciliar definitions have nearly always had this function of protecting theology from becoming trapped by the limitations of any single system. Dunn points out that one of the earliest heresies, Ebionism, was essentially conservative: "Ebionism was rejected because in a developing situation where Christianity had to develop and change, it did not" (p. 244). Now Dunn himself provides the justification for such conservatism by making the "unifying strand", "the canon within the canon", the sole criterion of acceptable diversity and thus giving one the excuse for rejecting anything in the later writings of the New Testament that goes beyond this minimum. The Ebionites would have opted for a rather smaller minimum than Dunn, but they would have been delighted with his arguments. In the end Dunn is just as frightened of pluralism as he *thinks* Catholics are, but he avoids the real problems by advocating toleration of others. If we really are to face up to the challenge of diversity in the New Testament then it will only be by accepting that our canon is the whole of the New Testament, and not any canon within the canon.

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EXPLORATIONS IN THEOLOGY 1 by D. E. Nineham. *SCM Press, London 1977*
pp. 212 £3.95

EXPLORATIONS IN THEOLOGY 2 by C. F. Evans, *SCM Press, London 1977*,
pp. 198 £3.95

These two volumes, the first of a new series, are collections of papers by Dennis Nineham and Christopher Evans. Both collections focus on New Testament criticism and its implications for theology in general. The eleven pieces in Evans's collection include a series of four lectures on the Passion narratives of the Gospels and a thoughtful essay on parable as a mode of discourse. Of Nineham's eleven articles, only one is previously unpublished: "Schweitzer Revisited," a substantial reappraisal of the achievement and importance of *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. The rest are, according to the publishers, "saved from likely oblivion in relatively inaccessible pamphlets, journals or other

collections," but a three-part study of "Eye-witness Testimony and the Gospel Tradition" first appeared in the widely accessible *Journal of Theological Studies*, while an article on "The use of the Bible in Modern Theology" and a very illuminating study of the genealogy in Matthew were originally published in the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*.

Perhaps the chief interest of Nineham's collection, then, lies not so much in the content of the individual papers as in the record they provide of the evolution of his thought during the twenty year period which those papers span. Indeed, the two volumes together well illustrate the developments of an important strain of Biblical