CHAPTER 3

Exonerating Gaius of Rome

Was Gaius orthodox or heretical? Or, was Gaius orthodox and heretical?¹

Poor Gaius. It is truly unfortunate that he has come to personify the antagonism with which the early church treated the Johannine literature because the evidence to support such a claim simply is not there, despite the fact that ‘definitive’² studies of Gaius claim otherwise.³

Despite branding him as a heretic, scholars are careful to strike a balance with claims of a successful ‘rehabilitation of Gaius as an early biblical critic.’⁴ This forces the question, which side is Gaius on? Is he orthodox or heretical? Scholars tend to want it both ways. Thus, we read claims that Gaius is indeed the lone member of the ‘heresy’ known as the Alogi, but his views, at least in his own time, were actually representative of the early Roman ecclesiastical sentiments towards the Johannine literature. As such, Gaius was ‘unequivocally on the side of orthodoxy’ in his fight against Montanism and his rejection of the Johannine literature was actually ‘in the service of the church in Rome.’⁵

From a later perspective this blend of orthodoxy and heresy seems incompatible, but in the second and third centuries we are reassured that it was not so anomalous. According to some modern estimations, Irenaeus tried, and failed, to exterminate Gaius’ dangerous views (cf. AH 3.11.9), however in the end Irenaeus overstated his case, for his idea of a four-fold Gospel canon was simply that—an ‘idea’, not a reality.⁶ Nor would it become a reality for some

---

¹ Smith, ‘Gaius,’ 2.
² Culpepper, John, 137, n. 86.
⁴ Ibid., 430.
⁵ Ibid., 429. Here Smith follows closely the views of Schwartz (‘Über den Tod,’ 93), who describes Gaius in precisely the same way.
⁶ E.g. Schwatz, ‘Über den Tod,’ 42: ‘Irenäus literarische Polemik war für die Praxis des römischen Bischofs nicht maßgebend.’ Likewise, G.M. Hahneman (101), in support of his later dating of the Muratorian Fragment, argues that Irenaeus’ four-fold Gospel must have been ‘something of an innovation, for if a fourfold gospel had been established and generally acknowledged, then Irenaeus would not have offered such a tortured insistence on its numerical legitimacy’. This view, while prevalent, is not universal. For an opposing view, see Stanton, ‘Fourfold Gospel,’ 319ff., esp. 322: ‘By the time Irenaeus wrote in about 180 AD, the fourfold gospel was very well established. Irenaeus is not defending an innovation, but explaining why, unlike
time. This is true at least for the epicenter of nascent Christianity and Gaius’ hometown, Rome, where, ‘To around the close of the second century, history is unable to name a single orthodox Roman for whom the Fourth Gospel had been of any significance.’

As the argument goes, for the true status of the Gospel canon in the early church one must look not to Irenaeus, but to the accused. Thus, attention turns to Gaius of Rome, who by modern (and ancient) accounts was a ‘conservative’ Roman ecclesiastical leader, ‘quite competent and astute in his rhetorical and exegetical skills,’ who defended local Roman orthodox tradition against ‘innovative’ foreign theologies that were potentially undermining of the truth of the Gospel.

Yet many scholars have pushed Gaius’ role in the early church further. It was because of Gaius’ careful study of the differences amongst the four canonical Gospels that later church fathers took seriously his analysis and wrestled with the issue of which works should constitute the Christian canon of scripture. From this view, Gaius is actually an underappreciated leader of the early church; one to whom subsequent Christianity owes a debt of gratitude for his preservation and promulgation of orthodoxy. Gaius comes off as a figure that is praised for his orthodoxy while also condemned for his heterodoxy.

3.1 The Gaian Paradox

Gaius’ attempt to protect the Roman church from the Montanist heresy by means of rejecting the Johannine literature thus creates a paradox where Gaius is both orthodox and heretical. It is a common refrain that it is not his fault that later church tradition would turn its back on his conservative,

the heretics, the church has four gospels, no more, no less.’ Also, Hill, Who Chose the Gospels?, 34–68, and Hengel, Four Gospels, 10: ‘He [Irenaeus] certainly did not invent this collection [of the Gospel ‘canon’] himself; it had already existed for quite a long time in the mainstream church, largely recognized and used in worship.’

7 For example, Elaine Pagels, Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas (New York: Random House, 2004), 111, argues that it was not until the fourth century when Athanasius ‘took up and extended Irenaeus’s agenda’ of the four-fold Gospel. See also Lee M. McDonald, ‘The Gospels in Early Christianity: Their Origin, Use, and Authority,’ in Stanley E. Porter (ed.), Reading the Gospels Today (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 150–178. McDonald notes (170), ‘Irenaeus’s acceptance of the four canonical Gospels alone was not generally shared by his contemporaries or even by many Christians at a later time.’

8 Bauer, Orthodoxy and Heresy, 208.