

## ST. PETER'S DENIAL <sup>1</sup>

By THE REV. G. W. H. LAMPE, D.D., F.B.A.

REGIUS PROFESSOR OF DIVINITY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

I AM greatly honoured and delighted to have been invited to deliver one of these lectures in memory of that great scholar in the New Testament field, Dr. Manson. In choosing the subject of Peter's denial I do not intend to make any new contribution to the historical criticism of the Gospels. My object is, rather, to follow up a question which I raised in an essay that I published in the volume of studies entitled *Christian History and Interpretation*, presented to John Knox in 1967 by Professors Farmer, Moule and Niebuhr. This essay was called, "Church Discipline and the Interpretation of the Epistles to the Corinthians", and my question concerned the relation between the story of Peter's denial and his subsequent reconciliation, on the one hand, and, on the other, the widespread conviction among the New Testament and early patristic writers that no Christian who denies the Lord in times of persecution can hope for restoration to the fellowship of the Church in this life. It seems to me that this is a problem which deserves further investigation with a view to an exploration of the *sitz-im-leben* in which the pericope of the Denial was shaped and transmitted. I do not intend, however, to attempt anything so difficult as this at the present time, but only to look again at the story and to consider a few examples of the ways in which it came to be handled by patristic authors who appreciated its far-reaching and in some respects disturbing implications.

The story itself is a self-contained unit of tradition, with some remarkable features. It is recorded by all four evangelists with relatively minor variations, and the clear and simple narrative which combines economy of words with vivid pictorial description stands in contrast with the obscure and confused account of the Jewish trial, or trials, of Jesus with which the evangelists in their different ways have interwoven it.

<sup>1</sup> The Manson Memorial Lecture delivered in the University of Manchester on the 21st of November 1972.

It is introduced abruptly, with relatively little connection with the preceding narrative ; the sayings in which the Denial is foretold by Jesus have the appearance of secondary material read back from the story itself. More remarkably, the episode has no explicit sequel in the same stratum of tradition. We should expect the evangelists to say at least as much about Peter's restoration as his fall ; but the fact of his forgiveness and re-commissioning has to be reconstructed from meagre fragments of tradition concerning an appearance of the risen Christ to Peter (1 Cor. xv. 5, Luke xxiv. 34), an appearance to the companions of Peter (Ign. *Smyrn.* 3.2) which may itself be a development of the Lucan Resurrection narrative, and a special mention of Peter in the words of the " young man " to the women at the tomb in the Marcan story (Mark xvi. 7). That Peter was restored is implied by the secondary, *post eventum*, prophecy in which Luke, using the missionary language of the early Church, makes Jesus speak of Peter's " conversion " (Luke xxii. 32 ; cf. Luke xvii. 4, Acts. iii. 19, ix. 35, xi. 21, xiv. 15, etc.), and also by those later reflections upon Peter's career which are embodied in the story of his post-Resurrection commissioning in the " appendix " to the Fourth Gospel, and in Matthew's picture of Peter's attempt to walk on the water, his " sinking ", and his rescue from the abyss (Matt. xiv. 28-31). But we are given no direct account of the happy ending to that sad story of the Denial.

The evangelists' variations in the main outline of the story are of no great significance. Mark and Matthew bring Peter, following at a distance, into the high priest's hall, and leave him, sitting with the attendants (Mark implying the fire in the hall which Luke explicitly mentions), while they describe the nocturnal trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin. They resume the story of Peter after narrating the mocking of Jesus. Luke, who knows of only one Jewish trial of Jesus, and that in the morning, has no need to interrupt the story of Peter. It stands as a continuous narrative between the episodes of the arrest and the mocking which, in Luke, precedes the trial. According to Luke, therefore, Peter has already denied Jesus before the trial begins. John similarly brings Peter to the hall of the high priest, apparently Annas, to which he is admitted after the " other disciple "

has come out and spoken to the woman porter. Peter's first denial, addressed to this doorkeeper, is followed by an examination of Jesus by the high priest. His second and third denials come after Jesus has been sent on to Caiaphas (John's narrative at this point is extremely confused) and is no longer present in the hall.

All the accounts agree that Peter denied three times; all mention the cockcrow, recalling Jesus' prophecy of the denial; the Synoptists agree that Peter wept. There are differences between them in detail, which, again, are of minor importance. Peter's interrogators, according to Mark, are a maid and bystanders; in Matthew they are two maids and bystanders; in Luke one maid and two men; in John the woman porter, bystanders, and a servant of the high priest who is a kinsman of the man whose ear Peter had cut off. The first accusation, according to Mark, is "You too were with the Nazarene, Jesus". Peter, so Mark tells us, denied, saying, "I neither know nor understand what it is you are saying", or possibly "I neither know him nor do I understand what it is you are saying". Matthew's version is, "You too were with Jesus the Galilæan", and Peter "denied before them all, saying, 'I do not know what you are saying'". In Luke the first charge is, "This man too was with him", and Peter's denial is in the form, "I do not know him, woman". The question in John is, "Are not you too one of this man's disciples?", and the reply is, "I am not". Mark and Matthew say that after his first denial Peter went out into the porch or forecourt; the maid (in Matthew a second maid) then said to the bystanders, "This man is (one) of them", or, in Matthew, "This man was with Jesus the Nazorean", and, without his answer being recorded, Peter is again said to have denied, Matthew adding, "with an oath, I know not the man". In Luke the second accusation is directed to Peter himself by another man (in John by the servants generally) and it takes the form, "You too are (one) of them". In John the second accusation repeats the first. The third accusation in Mark, like the first, is addressed to Peter: "Truly you are (one) of them; for you are also" (or, "actually") "a Galilæan", and Peter began to anathematize (Jesus), and to swear, "I know not this

man of whom you are speaking". Matthew fills this out, explaining that it is by his speech that the bystanders recognize Peter as a Galilean. Mark's *anathematizein* becomes *katathematizein*, and Peter swears, "I know not the man", thus repeating his second denial. In Luke the third accusation, by another man, after an interval of about an hour (represented in Mark and Matthew by "a little time"), is, "Truly, this man too was with him, for he also is a Galilean," and Peter's answer, like his first reply in Mark's version, is, "I do not know what you are saying". John tells us that on the third occasion Peter was asked, "Did I not see you in the garden with him?", and that he again denied.

The whole story, with its minor variations, shows signs of having been shaped so as to be brought into relation with the situation of the Church in times of persecution. This does not necessarily cast doubt on the historicity of the Denial itself. That the chief disciple should deny the Lord, that an apostate should become the leader of the apostolic mission, was a profoundly embarrassing element in the Church's tradition. The secret of the Church's ability to meet persecutions and survive them was its theology of martyrdom. This was the basis and the focus of its whole spiritual life. It was a clearly reasoned and closely articulated belief, rooted in the depths of the Church's central faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus, illustrated by the examples of prophets, apostles, and later Christian saints. It was capable of being grasped by the simplest Christian believer, trained to know what he ought to do when called upon to testify before a heathen court and to carry out his duty faithfully. The tradition that the chief apostle had repeatedly denied Christ under a much less formidable interrogation than ordinary Christians often had to face is difficult indeed to account for unless it is substantially based on the memory of something that actually happened. Bultmann's view that the story is legendary and literary is true only of the form in which it is told. Luke, in particular, added touches that heighten the dramatic tension. According to him, the cock crowed, not just, as in the other Gospels, "immediately", but "suddenly, while he (Peter) was still speaking". "The Lord turned", says Luke, using

one of his favourite devices for lifelike dramatic description (cf. Luke vii. 9, 44 ; ix. 55 ; x. 23 ; xiv. 25 ; xxiii. 28 ; used of Jesus by Matthew only twice (ix. 22, and in the rebuke to Peter (!) at xvi. 23), and once (i. 38) by John), and “ looked on Peter (*eneblepsen*) ”. In Mark it was the maid who looked on Peter (*emblemsasa*), and Luke, with his powerful sense of the dramatic, may have transferred Mark’s word, substituting *atenisasa* for *emblemsasa* in his description of the action of the maid in putting her question.

These are artificial touches, certainly, but the story itself is very unlikely to be a purely artificial construction. It is very noticeably free from scriptural echoes. Peter’s denial, unlike the treachery of Judas, was not foreshadowed in the Old Testament. Nor is there any obvious theological motive for the construction of this story. The general failure of the disciples to believe in the Christ and to remain loyal to him is, indeed, one of the theological themes in the gospel tradition. Their shortcomings were part of the divine plan foretold in scripture, for instance in Zechariah xiii. 7. But this theme was clearly enough brought out and illustrated in the narratives of the Last Supper and the Garden ; there was no need to refer the theme specifically to Peter as an individual and in so extreme a fashion as to make him curse Christ.

The narratives of the evangelists, however, contain a number of indications that the preservation and transmission of the tradition was affected by its bearing upon the conduct of the Church and its members in times of persecution. The accusation of Peter, in the form, according to the Synoptists, “ You too are (one) of them ”, is scarcely appropriate in Peter’s actual situation. Although the disciples are said to have scattered at the arrest of Jesus, and thereby fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah xiii. 7, there is no indication that even after the attempt at armed resistance in the garden either the Jewish or the Roman authorities regarded Jesus as the leader of a recognizable and dangerous band of followers who had to be hunted down and brought to share their leader’s fate. I admit that I think the historical reliability of the stories of the presence of relatives and disciples of Jesus at the Cross or watching from a distance to be highly

suspect. Nevertheless, there is no good evidence that the disciples had to go into hiding to avoid arrest. In Acts there is no indication that the followers of Jesus either expected or encountered trouble from the authorities until they had themselves provoked them by publicly "teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead" (Acts iv. 2). On the contrary, Luke (xxiv. 53) pictures the disciples, after the Ascension, congregating continually, as a body, in the Temple. It is only in the later strata of the tradition that it is assumed that the arrest and death of Jesus must naturally have involved something like a general persecution of his disciples. John (xx. 19) supposes that at Easter the disciples must have met behind locked doors "for fear of the Jews". The Gospel of Peter (7) goes further: Peter and his companions had to hide after the Crucifixion because they were being pursued by the Jewish authorities as malefactors who wanted to set fire to the Temple. Here the situation of the disciples at the time of Jesus' death seems to have become assimilated to that of the Christians at Rome during Nero's persecution. The earlier tradition implies that an accusation on the lines of "You too were with Jesus the Nazarene" accords with the likely circumstances, and that it has become assimilated to the vital question which believers in later times had to face in the courts, "Are you a Christian?". This, as the prefect Rusticus remarked to Justin, was the essential point in trials such as his (*Acta Justinii* 3). It was the threefold question put by Pliny to his prisoners (*Epp.* 10.96.3): the question that might elicit the martyr's inspired testimony, or, from one who "denied that he was Christ's", the unforgiveable blasphemy (cf. *Const. App.* 5.4). In trials where the punishable offence was *nomen ipsum*, the mere name of Christian, this was the decisive question. The Synoptists' "You are (one) of them" could not but remind a persecuted Church of that recurring moment of glory and of shame.

A further instance of an assimilation of the tradition to the situation of the persecuted Church may occur in Luke's version of Peter's protest to Jesus before the prophecy of his denial. Mark (xiv. 29; Matt. xxvi. 33) has "Even if all shall be made to stumble, yet not I". But Luke transposes this into the more

definite and more familiar contemporary terms : “ I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.”

More striking to persecuted Christians must have been the fact that Peter had to undergo a threefold interrogation. The double reiteration suggests, at the very least, that this is Peter's decisive moment. It is a solemn crisis, with which the reader would compare the triple revelation to Peter at Joppa (Acts x. 16, xi : 10), the threefold charge to Peter in John xxi, the thrice-offered prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane (Matt. xxvi. 44) and the finding asleep of Peter and the disciples three times, Paul's thrice-made prayer for relief (2 Cor. xii. 8), the threefold appeal to an offender to repent in the early Church's disciplinary procedure (Matt. xviii. 16), the three witnesses of 1 John v. 7, and the whole biblical emphasis on the solemn weight of threefold testimony. But in the context of confession and denial of Christ the threefold question may have suggested a closer parallel. Peter was not, indeed, interrogated by a magistrate, but the scene, and the form of the question, recall the Christian martyr-acts. In particular, it recalls the procedure adopted in Pliny's court. “ I asked them”, Pliny told the emperor, “ whether they were Christians, and, if they confessed, I asked them a second and third time with threats of punishment” (*Epp.* 10.96.3). We are reminded how Polycarp was three times ordered by the proconsul to swear by the *tyche* of Caesar (*Mart. Polyc.* 9-10). Pliny was ignorant of the precise nature of the crime for which Christians ought to be punished, though he had no doubt that people who obstinately persisted in affirming that they were Christians deserved punishment, and he had had no previous experience of such cases (10.96.1). Yet it is unlikely that he invented this procedure and that it had not previously been employed elsewhere. The narratives of the trials of Jesus do not, indeed, suggest that he was interrogated thrice ; only in the Fourth Gospel (John xviii. 33, 35, 37) does Pilate put the question, “ Are you the king of the Jews? ”, or its equivalent, three times, and in that gospel the interrogation passes over into dialogue. On the other hand, Roman law prescribed some similar procedures, such as the threefold citation on three successive days, which has to have been made before an absentee

defendant can have a judgement passed against him *in absentia* (CJC. 48.1.10). It is often said, moreover, though the evidence for this is unclear, that any accused person whose guilt rested only on his own confession, uncorroborated by evidence, had to be questioned thrice before he could be condemned. It seems likely that Mark may have intended to draw out the parallel between Peter's interrogation and that to which in his own day, conceivably in Nero's Rome, Christians might be subjected. Certainly the parallel would be clear enough to readers of his gospel in the second century.

The great prominence given by the evangelists, especially Mark, Matthew and John, to the fact that Peter "denied" ((*ap*)*arneisthai*) points in the same direction. The word itself can, of course, mean either "deny that . . ." (or "answer a question in the negative"), or "deny" a person ("disown" or "refuse to acknowledge" someone). In the stories of Peter's denial the former sense seems to shade off into the latter. In this latter sense the word is already in the New Testament a technical term in the vocabulary of persecution, martyrdom, apostasy and infidelity, occurring in this sense in Matthew x. 33/Luke xii. 9, Acts iii. 13-14, vii. 35 (of the rejection of Moses as a type of Christ), 1 Timothy v. 8, 2 Timothy ii. 12, Titus i. 16, 2 Peter ii. 1, 1 John ii. 22-23, Jude 4, Revelation ii. 13, iii. 8. (*Ap*)*arneisthai* in such passages as these virtually means "to apostatize", as often in patristic literature (e.g. *Hermas Sim.* 2.2.8, 9.26.5, *Vis.* 2.3.4., *Mart. Polyc.* 9.2, *Ep. Lugd.* ap Eus. *h.e.* 5.1, *Or. mart.* 35, etc.; cf. also the decoding of 666 as *arnoumai* in *Ps.-Hipp. consumm.* 28). The opposite term is *homologeîn*, "confess", as this is used in Matthew x. 32/Luke xii. 8 (this word is not elsewhere Lucan). We find it at John i. 20, where *homologeîn* and *arneisthai* occur in a way which reverses the normal order. For the Baptist to say, "I am *not*" is, in his case, actually to confess Christ; to say, "I am" would be in fact to deny him. *Homologeîn* is also found at John ix. 22, xii. 42, Romans x. 9, 1 Timothy vi. 12, 1 John ii. 23, iv. 2, iv. 15, 2 John 7, Revelation iii. 5, at 2 *Clem.* 3, *Mart. Polyc.* 12.1, and frequently in the literature of martyrdom. In that literature "believe" (*pisteueîn*) and "repent" (*metanoieîn*) also stand as opposites over against



“deny” (cf. *Ign. Magn.* 9.2, *Smyrn.* 5.2, *Herm. Sim.* 9.28.4, 7, etc.). Another side of this picture is shown by Lucian (*Mort. Peregr.* 13) when he uses the same word “to deny” (*aparneisthai*) for the purpose of describing the apostasy of Christians from the Hellenic gods in order to worship their crucified sophist. Peter’s act of “denial” therefore makes him an archetype of the Christian who disowns his Lord under persecution.

Mark, however, makes Peter go further even than this. At the third interrogation Peter “began to anathematize and to swear, ‘I know not this man’”. The versions usually translate *anathematizein* absolutely: “he began to curse”; but there seems to be no parallel for this intransitive usage of the verb, and we therefore probably ought to understand Mark to be telling us that Peter “cursed him” or “cursed this man”. I made this point in the essay I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, and I was glad to see, three years later, that the same conclusion was independently reached by Dr. Helmut Merkel in his essay, “Peter’s Curse”, in the collection of essays on *The Trial of Jesus*, edited by Ernst Bammel. At the same time I was somewhat ashamed to discover that we had both been anticipated by Professor Bornkamm (*Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 212).

If this interpretation is correct, Peter carried his denial to the ultimate point of apostasy, cursing Christ and swearing on oath that he was not one of Christ’s followers. To curse Christ was one of the things which Pliny used as a test for those who said in his court that they “neither were nor ever had been Christians”. It was something which “those who are really Christians cannot be made to do” (*Epp.* 10.96.5). When Polycarp was told by the proconsul, “Swear, and I release you”, he replied, “How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” (*Mart. Polyc.* 9.3). Peter spontaneously cursed Christ and swore, without being asked to do so. He thus exemplifies the most extreme form of apostasy. He is the archetype of the worst class among the *lapsi*. The depth of Peter’s disgrace is brought out by the contrast between his denial, “I am not” (John xviii. 17, 25), which, itself, is an ironical echo of John the Baptist’s “I am not” in John i. 20, and the “good confession” (*homologia*) that was witnessed (*martyresantos*) by Jesus before Pilate (1 Tim. vi. 13).

Peter's " I am not " is also the antithesis of the " I am " of the reply of Jesus to the high priest at Mark xiv. 62.

Matthew, alone of the evangelists, tells us that Peter " denied before (them) all " (*emprosthē panton*) (Matt. xxvi. 70). In this way Matthew links the Denial with the sayings of Jesus concerning confession and denial in time of persecution which we find in the Q tradition at Matthew x. 32-33 and Luke xii. 8-9 : " Whoever will acknowledge (or confess to) me before men, I too will confess to him before my father in heaven ", or, in Luke's version, " . . . the Son of man also will confess to him before the angels of God ", " but whoever will deny me before men (*emprosthē* (or in Luke *enopion*)*ton anthropon*) I too will deny him before my father in heaven " (in Luke, " he who has denied me before men will be denied (*aparnethesetai*) before the angels of God "). This raises the question of the relation in the Gospels between these sayings and the episode of Peter's denial.

They are part of a section of the Q tradition, partly paralleled in Mark and John, which is concerned in detail with the persecutions that the Church is to encounter. The sayings are in fact a foundation document of the highest importance for the development of the Christian theology of martyrdom. The central affirmation is that a disciple who is brought for examination before either Jewish or Gentile courts (cf. Matt. x. 17-18) must use his trial as an opportunity, or, rather, as the great opportunity, for propaganda. The court is the platform for his testimony, and when he gives it he is assured of direct inspiration. The confessor is like the prophet. What he says is not his own words but the words of the Holy Spirit speaking within him (Matt. x. 19-20). The confessor is the true imitator of Christ, sharing in the fate of his Master (x. 24-25), and sharing in his victory over those who may kill the body but cannot kill the soul (x. 28-31). Hence the confessor who bears faithful witness in a human court will be acknowledged by the Son of man at the last Judgement before the court of heaven ; but denial on earth will mean being disowned in heaven.

The idea that a confessor who testifies to Christ before his persecutors is in the highest degree a Spirit-possessed person is central to the Christian understanding of martyrdom. It finds expression frequently in the literature of martyrdom, for example

in the Epistle of Lyons and Vienne (ap. Eus. *h.e.* 5.1.10) and Tertullian *ad martyras* (1). It is the basis of the claim of the confessors in the time of Cyprian to possess authority, as inspired men, to restore the lapsed to communion. It is also the foundation of the Donatists' boast that theirs was the true church of the martyrs, indwelt by the Spirit. The converse of this belief is that the apostate will be disowned by Christ at the parousia. The Son of man will be ashamed of him (Mark viii. 38). Luke makes this point especially clear. He does so by referring the Marcan saying about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mark iii. 28-29) to the choice that confronted persecuted believers. If they testify they need not be anxious how to frame their apologia, for the Holy Spirit will teach them what they ought to say. But to deny Christ is to repudiate the Holy Spirit, to reject his counsel, and so to commit the blasphemy for which there can be no forgiveness (Luke xii. 9-12).

The saying that apostates will be denied by the Son of man at the Judgement was itself a sufficient ground for the early Church's rigorism towards the lapsed. We find it quoted in the acts of martyrs, for instance in the *Martyrdom of Achatius* (3) and the *Martyrdom of Irenaeus* (3). Not, of course, that the idea was itself novel: the rule of the Qumran community provided that a blasphemer, frightened by persecution, should be perpetually excluded from the fellowship (6.24 ff.). An intensified rigorism, however, sprang from Luke's transference into the context of apostasy of Mark's saying about the unforgiveable blasphemy. The condemnation of the lapsed at the final Judgement has already become a present reality, for, from the moment when he rejected the promised inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the apostate has cut himself off from the possibility of restoration. In Matthew's version of the saying about the unforgiveable sin the context of persecution and apostasy is not as explicit as in Luke; but the emphasis on the impossibility of restoration for the blasphemer is even stronger: "It will not be forgiven him either in this age or in that which is to come" (Matt. xii. 32).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The saying about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is applied quite differently in the *Didache* (11.7). There the ultimate sin is understood to consist in testing and judging one who is a genuinely Spirit-inspired prophet.

It seems probable that at an early stage in the development of the tradition the question had already been raised about the bearing of these grim warnings on the story of Peter. Could there be any exception to this inexorable condemnation of apostates? Alternatively, was Peter's denial in some way different from the kind of apostasy which took place in Pliny's court when some of the accused denied that they were, or ever had been, Christians, and confirmed it by paying respect to the gods and to the emperor's image and by cursing Christ? The beginnings of an answer to these questions may perhaps be detected in the modified form in which the Marcan saying about the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit appears in Matthew and Luke. According to Mark (iii. 28), all sins and blasphemies will be forgiven to the sons of men, except the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, and this blasphemy, it is made clear, consists in ascribing the works of Jesus to an unclean spirit. Luke and Matthew, on the other hand, distinguish between "saying a word against the Son of man", which will be forgiven, and speaking, or blaspheming, against the Holy Spirit (Luke xii. 10; Matt. xii. 32). It seems unlikely that this enigmatic allusion to speaking against the Son of man is simply the result of a misunderstanding of Mark's quite straightforward and easily intelligible saying. Rather, it may represent a deliberate modification of the tradition in view of the embarrassing episode of Peter. Peter did indeed speak against the Son of man, but, nevertheless, he did not utter the fatal blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. What the implied reason may be for the distinction is not clear. Later writers suggest various explanations: that Peter had not yet been baptized at the time of Christ's death, and so was not a participant in the Holy Spirit; hence his conduct, unlike that of an apostate in the post-Resurrection Church, did not involve a deliberate repudiation of the Spirit; that before the Resurrection Peter could not have known, and so could not deny, Jesus as the exalted Lord who poured out the Spirit upon his Church; that at that stage the truth about Jesus was still to some extent mysteriously, but providentially, concealed from his disciples, and therefore Peter's offence was excusable; and so on. It seems not impossible that Luke and Matthew believed, like the Fourth Evangelist,

that not until after the Resurrection could the significance of Jesus be fully understood and his disciples be enabled by the Spirit to confess him as Lord. Peter's denial, therefore, though it was a "speaking against the Son of man", was not the same thing as the repudiation by an apostate Christian of the Church's confession, "Jesus Christ is Lord".

Perhaps we may discern at this point the beginning of one of the two lines of argument to which the story of the Denial gave rise. One line starts from such texts as Matthew x. 33 and parallels and Mark iii. 28-30 and parallels, and from the general belief of the Church expressed in such passages as Hebrews vi. 4-8 and 1 John v. 16-17. This is the conviction that if a man has denied the full Christian faith into which he was baptized he has sinned beyond all possibility of penance and restoration. The argument is then that Peter repented and was restored, therefore he did not deny the full faith professed by baptized Christians. The other line begins from Peter's repentance and restoration, and argues that since Peter found forgiveness, despite the fact that he had cursed Christ like the worst of the *lapsi*, therefore the rigorist attitude must be wrong: the lapsed ought not to be denied all hope of restoration in this life.

Hints of the former line of argument may be discerned in the New Testament. There are no traces of the latter, unless it be that in painting Peter's denial in the blackest of black and presenting it uncompromisingly as the ultimate repudiation of Christ, Mark intends his readers, who may possibly have experienced for themselves the choice between confession and apostasy in Nero's persecution, to draw the conclusion that, if Peter could fall so far and yet be raised again to the leadership of the Church, then reconciliation cannot be absolutely refused to weaker brethren.

We cannot be sure that this was how Mark or his church interpreted the tradition, but it is, at any rate, improbable that they read it simply as a warning against over-confidence and lack of spiritual vigilance. The assumption, so often made, that the early Church was uniformly and completely rigorist in its attitude towards apostates and others who committed the gravest sins is not necessarily correct. Paul's treatment of very serious

offenders at Corinth (1 Cor. v. 1-5, 2 Cor. ii. 1-11) may suggest the contrary, and it is by no means certain that the attitude of Hermas was quite unprecedented when he announced as a revelation that those who had denied in persecution could be granted one opportunity to repent and be reconciled. The oracles of Hermas about repentance are often obscure ; but he certainly believes that repentance is available for those who have denied the faith. This liberal attitude towards those who lapsed in the past is combined with severity for the future : " It is impossible for him to be saved who shall now deny his Lord ; but for those who denied him long ago repentance seems to be possible " (*Sim.* 9.26.5 ; cf. *Sim.* 8.6, *Vis.* 2.2.7-8). The possibility of repentance is also linked by Hermas with a distinction between apostates as such, on the one hand, and, on the other, those whom he calls " betrayers of the servants of God " (*Sim.* 9.19.1, 3).

This distinction corresponds in some measure to the difference between Peter and Judas. Persecuted Christians were in a peculiarly difficult situation, unlike that of most members of underground movements. In the ordinary way a member of a proscribed organization who has been arrested will naturally think it right, and, indeed, that it is his duty, to deny that he belongs to it. In doing so he is serving the interests of the movement as well as protecting himself. But the Church not merely expected but required its members to acknowledge " the name ", that is to say, to declare themselves to be Christians. That the profession of " the name " was the direct reason why Christians were placed in jeopardy is clear from Pliny's account of the matter in *Epp.* 10.96.2, from Justin 2 *apol.* 2, and the repeated complaints of the Apologists that the authorities did not trouble to enquire whether the Christians had actually committed any specific crimes, and from Clement's argument (*Str.* 4.11-12) against Basilides about the problem of divine providence in relation to the persecution of believers merely for being Christians and not because of actual crimes. To bear witness to Christ and seal it by death was therefore the supreme expression of discipleship. Martyrdom was the crowning glory of Christian life, and the Church's theory of martyrdom turned what, in most persecuted organizations, would be a commonsense policy of concealment into a form of

treason. The only concession that the Church made was to discourage enthusiasts from voluntarily giving themselves up to the authorities. As the church of Smyrna expressed it in the middle of the second century, "We do not commend those who surrender themselves, for such is not the teaching of the gospel" (*Mart. Polyc. 4*). This official warning was often repeated as time went on. Yet denial, serious as it was in these circumstances, was less damaging than actual treachery, and the Church had to encounter a certain amount even of this. Judas had successors in the Roman Christians who were arrested by Nero, "confessed" (that is, probably, to being Christians rather than to burning the city), and then informed against a "vast multitude" who were consequently arrested (*Tacitus Ann. 15.44.5*). Other betrayers appear in the story of Polycarp (*Mart. Polyc. 6.1-2*). Hermas, it seems, suggests, very naturally, that although there can be reinstatement for renegades there can be none for traitors.

Justin does not appear to distinguish the conduct of Peter from that of the other disciples. He says, in *1 apol. 50*, that the acquaintances of Jesus all deserted and denied him, and, in *Dial. 106*, that after the Resurrection they repented of their desertion of him when he was crucified. It seems that Justin is alluding here to the story of Emmaus and perhaps inferring the repentance of the disciples from the question, "Did not our heart burn within us?" Usually, however, Christian authors make a sharp distinction, as we should expect, between Peter's active denial and the passive flight of the other disciples, and they generally understand his repentance to have been shown in his bitter weeping after the cockcrow. In the second century some attempt was made to supplement that laconic but fully sufficient statement, that Peter went out and wept bitterly. According to the *Acts of Peter (7, 20)*, the apostle admitted the threefold denial to the congregation at Rome. In conventional scriptural phrases he explained how Satan had overcome him, but "the Lord", he said, "did not impute it to me but turned to me and had pity on the infirmity of my flesh when I bitterly lamented and bewailed the weakness of my faith because I was befooled by the devil and did not keep in mind the word of my Lord". "Christ", says Peter, "defended me when I sinned and comforted me by his greatness."

The case of Peter does not seem to have been adduced in the early third-century controversy concerning Church discipline. According to Hippolytus, the scriptural authority to which Callistus appealed for his "general indulgence" was primarily the parable of the wheat and the tares. He also made use of the typology of Noah's ark which, with its mixed cargo of clean and unclean beasts, pointed to an inclusive, non-perfectionist Church in which saints and sinners must co-exist for the duration of the present age (*Haer.* 9.12.22). In any case, the episode of Peter would not be particularly relevant to this dispute, for Hippolytus does not attack Callistus on the specific issue of the reconciliation of apostates; he was concerned with what he regarded as Callistus' laxity towards grave sin in general.

Tertullian's silence about the forgiveness of Peter may be more significant, for had he attempted to explain it in a fashion that would be consistent with his own rigorism he might have found himself in even greater difficulties than he encountered in his handling of Paul's treatment of the incestuous man at Corinth (*Pudic.* 13 ff.). Tertullian does touch upon the story of Peter when he is trying to show that to ascribe persecutions to the agency of the devil is not inconsistent with belief in the over-ruling providence of God (*Fug.* 2.4). Christ's words recorded in Luke xxii. 31-32 mean that Satan was allowed to have his way with Peter, as with Job, only up to a certain point; he was not permitted to destroy Peter's faith. This suggests that in Tertullian's view Peter's lapse was of a comparatively minor kind. It did not involve a total loss of faith, and it was therefore venial. This is an interesting explanation of the reason why Peter could be forgiven, for Tertullian undoubtedly believed that Peter and the other apostles had either been baptized or had received, through their companionship with Christ, an equivalent to baptism (*Bapt.* 11-14). He was accordingly prevented from arguing that because Peter had not received Christian baptism at the time of the denial his offence was less grave than that of members of the contemporary Church who apostatized in time of persecution.

When the controversy about the treatment of the lapsed became acute after the Decian persecution Cyprian often appealed to the texts in the Gospels about confession and denial.



Those who evade the duty of confessing themselves to be Christians in persecution are warned by Mark viii. 38: "Whoever shall be ashamed of me . . . of him shall the Son of man be ashamed." Luke xii. 8 ff., which promises that the confessor will be acknowledged by the Son of man before the angels, whereas the denier will himself be disowned before the angels, is used in an argument against the granting of indulgence towards the lapsed by the confessors. The promise of reward for martyrdom, which is itself the ground for the claim of the confessors to have authority to grant pardons, is guaranteed by the same text which warns apostates that they will be denied by Christ. If the text is not true, then the confessors have no standing for their issue of pardons; but if it is true, then they cannot intervene against the verdict that Christ pronounces against apostates (*Laps.* 28). Matthew x. 33, "Whoever denies me before men, I myself will deny him before my Father in heaven", and Mark iii. 28 f., the saying concerning blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, are also cited by Cyprian in order to show that the lapsed must not be restored to communion until, after peace has returned to the Church, they have done penance, performed *exomologesis*, and received the imposition of the hand from the bishop and the clergy (*Ep.* 16.2, cf. *Epp.* 30.7, 59.12).

Against the background of this use of the texts in the Gospels concerning confession and apostasy, the forgiveness of Peter becomes an important point in arguments against the rigorism of the Novatianists and, later, the Donatists. The mid-third-century treatise, *Ad Novatianum*, included in the *spuria* of Cyprian, shows that Matthew x. 33, "Whoever shall deny me before men, I myself will deny him . . .", was, as we should expect, a Novatianist proof-text. But, the author argues, Novatianists are wrong in applying it to the excommunication of the lapsed; in so doing, they are seeking to anticipate Christ's verdict at the last Judgement. The proper reference of the text is eschatological, like that of Matthew vii. 22 f., "I will confess to them, I never knew you". The latter text shows, says this author, that it will be heretics and schismatics who will be denied at the Judgement. Christ did not deny those who deserted and denied him. He predicted Peter's denial, but he did not, in his turn,

deny Peter, but sustained him and comforted him when he bitterly lamented his denial of Christ (*Ad Novat.* 7).

In the approximately contemporary treatise *De Rebaptismate*, the purpose of which is to distinguish "Spirit baptism", conferred by the laying-on of hands, from baptism in water, Peter's denial is taken as a proof that those who have been baptized with water and have fallen into apostasy or error may be restored to fellowship through the imposition of the bishop's hands, a rite which confers baptism with the Spirit. Peter and the other disciples were baptized, and afterwards they deserted and denied Christ, but subsequently they received the true baptism with the Spirit at Pentecost (*Rebapt.* 6, 9). In this sense, they were still unbaptized when they either ran away or actually denied the Lord.

The same themes of Peter's denial and the Gospel texts about apostasy are applied by Origen to a different set of problems. In his treatise on martyrdom Origen makes great use of Matthew x. 33 and Luke xii. 8 ff., and develops the contrast between confession (*homologein*) and denial (*arneisthai*); but Peter's conduct raises difficulties. It exposes Christians to the sneers of Celsus: even the disciples, who were actually Christ's own companions, so far from dying with him, or for him, denied that they were his followers. In his reply to Celsus Origen minimizes the seriousness of Peter's offence. When he and the others sinned, they were still only novices and beginners; afterwards they were reformed and went on to testify, suffer and die for the teaching of Christ. Further, like Tertullian, Origen maintains that Peter never lost his faith. He and the other disciples did indeed show cowardice, but they never surrendered their belief that Jesus was the Christ. It was this that enabled Peter to realize his guilt and to weep bitter tears because of it (*Cels.* 2.45, 39). Another difficulty arose in respect of free will. Origen links Peter's denial with Paul's persecution of the Church in an argument against determinism. Peter and Paul belonged to that good tree which cannot bear evil fruit. Yet they did bear evil fruit. The blame cannot be ascribed to some evil spirit, acting through them, which actually did the denying in Peter's case and the persecuting in Paul's, for if this were so, and the human beings

were not free agents, why should Peter have wept bitterly or Paul have acknowledged that he was unworthy to be called an apostle? (*Princ.* 1.8.2).

In the argument against Novatianist rigorism the story of Peter continued to be cited. The threefold denial and the threefold invitation to Peter to profess his love for Jesus are adduced by Epiphanius to show that the Novatianists are one-sided in their use of scripture. They pick out only the "severe" texts, such as Hebrews vi. 4-8, and ignore those which promise repentance and restoration through good works. Peter's denial and reconciliation, like the apostasy and forgiveness of Manasseh, shows that repentance is always available (*Haer.* 59.1, 8).

A new twist is given to the argument from the story of Peter by Optatus when he uses it against the Donatists. The Donatists have broken the unity of the Church and sinned against charity for the sake of a rigorist attitude towards the lapsed. The case of Peter, however, ought to be an object-lesson to them. Christ did, indeed, say that he who denied him would be denied before the Father, but for the sake of unity Peter was not only pardoned but preferred above the other apostles and given the keys of the kingdom. From this we must learn that sins ought to be buried for the sake of unity; charity covers the multitude of sins. So, for the sake of unity, the apostles did not withdraw from communion with Peter who denied his Master, the Lord, the Son of God (*Optatus* 7.3).

Jerome resumes the more traditional anti-Novatianist argument with great vigour. What, he asks, would Novatian have us do about Peter's denial? Would he have us receive Peter on his return to Christ, or should we cast him out and let the chief apostle be lost to the Church? If Christ receives Peter, will Novatian exclude him? Novatian holds that those who have been baptized and have fallen and are now penitent ought not to be helped and restored; yet when Peter repented he was helped by Christ, and given a higher status, that of "shepherd", than that which he lost when he fell (*Ep.* 35). Jerome challenges the identification of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit with the denial of Christ in persecution. Novatianists assert that no one can commit the sin against the Holy Spirit except the Christian

who apostatizes. Jerome argues, on the other hand, that it is not those who deny Christ under the stress of torture who are guilty of the unforgiveable sin. It is those who ascribe the mighty acts of God to the devil. Novatianists cannot cite an instance of a Christian, compelled to offer sacrifice before a tribunal, ascribing the works of Jesus to Beelzebub; nor can Novatianists tell us what it is to speak against the Son of man and what it is to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. Jerome himself would maintain that those who denied Christ in persecution spoke against the Son of man but did not blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. If to deny Christ is also to deny the Spirit, then let the Novatianist explain how he who speaks against the Son of man does not commit the unpardonable sin. When Peter was terrified by the maid's question, did he speak against the Son of man or blaspheme the Spirit? Jerome also rejects an excuse for Peter's denial which had been advanced by Hilary, among others. Commenting on the Denial (*Comm. in Mt. 31.5, 32.4*) Hilary had suggested that Christ's "sorrow unto death" in Gethsemane was due to fear lest the disciples should deny him to be God, and thus commit the blasphemy against the Spirit. But in fact Peter denied him as man, and any saying against the Son of man is remissible. Peter first replied that he did not understand the question, then that he was not a follower of Jesus, then that he did not know the man. And he could deny the man without offence, since he had been the first to acknowledge Jesus to be the Son of God. But because through the weakness of the flesh he had spoken ambiguously, he wept bitterly. Similar exegesis is found in Ambrose (*Lc. 10.82*). This, says Jerome, would make Jesus a liar, for he predicted that Peter would deny him, that is, the Son of God. Peter in fact did deny the Son of God, and he wept bitterly and wiped out the triple denial by a triple confession. This is proof, for Jerome, that the unforgiveable sin is unforgiveable just because it does not consist in apostasy in persecution but in calling God Beelzebub even when you are confronted by his mighty works (*Ep. 149*).

Augustine also condemns the ancient identification of the ultimate sin with apostasy. There is no evidence, he says, for the idea that people sin against the Holy Spirit if, after

baptism, they fall into mortal sin : adultery, murder, apostasy from Christianity or from the Catholic Church. Penance is granted in the Church for all offences, and Christ certainly did not mean that every blasphemy and every word against the Spirit should be unforgiveable. The real sin against the Holy Spirit is impenitence. This is unforgiveable, for it is penitence alone that can secure forgiveness. The judgement on final impenitence cannot be pronounced in this world, for no man's repentance is to be despaired of. Even blasphemy against the Son of man is forgiveable if it is repented of. The text does not mean that blasphemy against the humanity of Christ is less than blasphemy against the deity of the Spirit, for all blasphemies are remissible to the sons of men, and this includes blasphemy against the Father himself. Hence, Luke xii. 8-10 shows that the salvation of Peter was not to be despaired of, even though he denied Christ before men three times. For Peter did not commit the blasphemy of the impenitent heart by which men resist the forgiveness of sins. He wept, and repented, and so he received the Spirit not only for his own restoration but for the preaching and conferring of the remission of sins (*Serm.* 71).

Augustine also follows the old tradition of exegesis in using the story of Peter as an argument against rigorism. He cites it against the followers of Lucifer of Cagliari and others in *De Agone Christiano* 31 ff. The keys of the kingdom were given to the Church when they were bestowed on Peter. The Church ought therefore to pardon her penitent sons, since Peter was granted forgiveness after he had hesitated on the sea, tried carnally to call the Lord back from his passion, cut off the servant's ear, thrice denied the Lord himself, and later, at Antioch, fallen into superstitious dissimulation. Yet, when he had been corrected and restored he attained the glory of the Lord's passion. The Church was right to receive back those who had temporarily lapsed into Arianism and returned, like Peter, warned by the cockcrow, after he had wept for his denial. But the Luciferians, impiously reprehending the maternal charity of the Church, deserve to share in the fall of Lucifer, who rose in the morning, because they fail to rejoice when Peter rises after cockcrow. Those who deny that the Church can remit all sins do

not understand the rock, Peter, on which it is founded. They proclaim themselves to be purer than the apostles and their teaching. They ought not to call themselves *mundi* but *mundani*, because, since they think they cannot be corrected and pardoned when they sin they have in fact chosen to be condemned with the world. In refusing pardon to sinners they are not preserving them in health ; they are stealing medicine from the sick.

Peter is often used as an illustration in Augustine's sermons. Peter, he says, was not fated to deny Jesus. Hence he could repent. In fact, until Jesus had died and risen, no one could die for Christ or for confessing Christ's name. Hence it was that the weak Peter, who was interrogated about his belief in Christ, did not die for it, and the strong Baptist, who did die, did not die for Christ (*enarr. in Ps. 140. 25 ff.*). Augustine says that members of Christ's body may fail for a time by denying Christ but come to life again through repentance ; they may lose the palm of martyrdom but gain it subsequently by a renewed confession. Peter was a type of the Church. The word of truth was not utterly taken away from his mouth, but although for the time he denied, he was restored through weeping and later he was crowned through confessing (*enarr. 13 in Ps. 118.3*). It is interesting that Augustine preached on Peter's denial (which he ascribes to human presumption), his restoration, and his subsequent martyrdom, in the context of a sermon about Saints Castus and Aemilius (*Serm. 285*). These martyrs appear in Cyprian (*Laps. 13*) as having denied the faith but later confessed it and suffered death : pardoned by the Lord in their martyrdom, as Cyprian puts it.

Finally, Augustine pursues the argument about Peter against a Novatianist, in *Ep. 265 to Seleuciana*. Here the question concerns baptism. The Novatianist alleged that Peter had not been baptized. This Augustine refuses to accept. Baptism is necessary for salvation in all cases, save that of a martyr who is killed before he can receive the sacrament, and in the light of John iii. 5 and the words of Jesus to Peter at the feet-washing, " he who has been bathed needs not save to wash his feet ", one must suppose that Peter had received baptism. Nevertheless, it is equally impossible for Augustine to suppose that Peter did

penance for his denial in the way in which post-baptismal sinners perform penance in the Church. It would be intolerable to think that the first of the apostles was numbered among these penitents. The solution must be that Peter did indeed weep and repent, but the Resurrection had not yet confirmed his faith, nor had he received the inbreathing from the risen Lord when he said, "Receive the Holy Spirit", or the Spirit's advent at Pentecost. It could therefore rightly be maintained that, though baptized in water, Peter, when he denied the Lord, had not been baptized with the Holy Spirit.

In the atmosphere of these discussions, however, we seem to have travelled far from the world of the evangelists ; and we must go no farther now.