

The Churches the Apostles Left Behind

Raymond E. Brown S.S., Paulist Press, 1984, 156 pp., \$4.95

Brown's interest here is to explore what kinds of focus and priority the apostles left to their converted communities when they died out around 60 A.D. He uses the scriptures to detect the concerns that their individual authors were anxious should shape the new Christian communities that they left behind. The term that is used to identify this period from about 60 A.D. to about 100 A.D. is called the "Sub-Apostolic Era".

The author first looks at the Pauline heritage in the pastoral letters to Timothy and Titus. These are considered by biblical scholars to be products of the "third Paul" – farthest removed from the original (first) Paul. The concern is no longer missionary; the communities have been formed. Now the writer wants to be sure of their survival. So the communities are instructed to put leaders – presbyter-bishops – in place. These people are to safeguard the orthodoxy of the teaching and be father figures for the churches. The downside of this emphasis is that authority is so easy to abuse and the pastoral epistles themselves slam women and their role in church!

The concern of Colossians and Ephesians are the book's next topic. These two epistles are considered to have been written by the "second" Paul. They are not yet focused on institutional survival (like the pastoral epistles). Instead, they picture an idealistic concept of church, building on the body of Christ idea. The church is "his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." (Eph. 1:23) "The body of Christ imagery personalizes the church and encourages our love for it in imitation of the love that Christ has for his bride." (p.53) The risk in this vision is that the sins and stupidity of the human church can get overlooked and dismissed. It blurs insight into the need for constant reform.

Next comes the Pauline position as seen in Luke's gospel and Acts of the Apostles. Luke's preoccupation is more with the Spirit and the need to be conscious of the Spirit's role in shaping the community (church). The Spirit is given to all at baptism and so believers are, together, a holy people. Peter and Paul both surprisingly drop out of Luke's narrative. "Luke is not interested in these men as such, but in them as vehicles of the Spirit, bearing witness to Christ." (p.66) The weakness in Luke's vision is that it invites us to gloss over problems, leaving solutions to the Spirit.

Brown next takes up the contribution of Peter. The 1 Peter letter was probably written by a disciple of Peter's from Rome in the 80's or 90's. Its focus is on church as "the people of God", a new Israel given a new identity by God. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." (1 Peter 2:9) The negative side of this focus is that it excludes outsiders – Jews and people with other faith convictions. The "people of God" image so prominent in the Vatican II document on the church finds its roots here. The risk in this focus is that it may diminish the significance of the individual charisms that is more obvious in the body-of-Christ image.

The book next takes on an examination of John's writings. "The Fourth Gospel emphasizes *discipleship*, a status that all Christians enjoy; and within that status what confers dignity is the love of Jesus." (p.91) In John, it is this discipleship that is important, not charisms and not roles or offices. There is a priority given to personal, individual relationship with Jesus. The role of church community is to foster and support that relationship with Jesus.

The epistles of John continue that thought. The Paraclete-Spirit is the gift of Jesus to every believer. But others – and those judged to be heretical – are to be excluded. So John's famous emphasis on gospel love does not extend to those on the outside! His gospel disparages Jesus' enemies as just "the Jews"! This pervasive intolerance apparently drove the Johannine community out of existence.

The book concludes with a chapter on Matthew. This scripture author did not write epistles; he subtly incorporated his post-resurrection advice into his gospel account itself. Brown has great admiration for Matthew in the context of the book. He subtitles this chapter "Authority that does not stifle Jesus". Matthew is sensitive to the Jewish context of Jesus' culture and teaching. He is nuanced in dealing with issues of wealth, Gentiles, government, sinners, and authority. Always the balanced advice is put into the mouth or behavior of Jesus. Matthew's kingdom (church) is a place where the helpless child is the model for power and forgiveness and second chances are limitless.

Brown hopes that study of the models that helped the early church communities survive – with their differing emphases – will help current church traditions to better respect and learn from each other. "I contend that in a divided Christianity, instead of reading the Bible to assure ourselves that we are right, we would do better to read it to discover where we have not been listening." (p.150)