

## BOOK REVIEWS

Brown, Raymond E. *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*. New York: Paulist Press, 1984. 156 pp. Paperback, \$4.95.

This book contains Brown's Sprunt Lectures, delivered at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, in January of 1980. As published, the book reads well and carries on an extended conversation with other scholars in the footnotes. Brown begins by defining the apostolic age as the period A.D. 33-66, and the sub-apostolic age as the period A.D. 67-100. Brown's concern in the book is "to see how the different emphasis" in each of seven witnesses of the sub-apostolic age answers "*the question of survival* after the death of the great first generation of apostolic guides or heroes" (p. 30; italics his). After an exposition of each of the seven answers presented, Brown does an evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses.

In the Pauline tradition, Brown finds three answers: According to the Pastorals, survival depends on the establishment of regulations for a structured clergy that enjoys religious respectability. This answer attempts to preserve the apostolic heritage in the face of radical new teachers, and to encourage institutional virtues in pastors. But it creates a sharp division between those who teach and those who are taught. In Colossians/Ephesians, the answer is the deification or reification of the church, and the demand that the allegiance of the members be to the church. But this overlooks, or may be a way of covering up, the real wrongs that may exist within the church, and may prevent needed reforms. In Luke/Acts, the church is seen as the agent of the Spirit that was active in the Law and the Prophets and in Jesus, and that now acts through the apostles. The continuity of the Spirit's activity insures bigger and better things. But this romantic triumphalism cannot account for the internal tensions and the reverses suffered by the gospel in the real world.

In 1 Peter, Brown finds the three Pauline answers filtered through the Petrine prism, and as a result the church is seen as belonging within the background of Israel. In trying to encourage Christians undergoing severe persecution, whose churches may have been established by the Petrine Gentile mission in northern Asia Minor, this Roman author, who is also acquainted with the ecclesiology of the Pastorals, does not answer in terms of church structures. Instead, he elaborates on how God in the desert created a people by bringing in those who were not a people. But this emphasizing of election may only fuel the antipathy of "those outside."

The Fourth Gospel, Brown suggests, offers the exact opposite answer to that given in the Pastorals. Here, survival is dependent on the egalitarian

nature of the community of disciples, including women. Neither office nor charisma is given status; rather, only organic attachment in love to Jesus is what authenticates Christians. This emphasis on a personal relationship has made John the gospel of choice among revivalists. But this lack of ecclesiastical structure, according to Brown, allowed for the rise of a secessionist movement within the ancient Christian community, which, as the Johannine Epistles show, brought about the rupture of *koinonia* between the two groups and led to the rise of the "Elder" as an ecclesiastical authority indispensable for survival. Still, the Johannine tradition serves as a reminder that the church must not occupy the place of Christ in the lives of Christians.

Finally, Brown sees the Gospel of Matthew as reflecting a situation in which legalists and libertines espouse strongly adversary positions. In a discriminating and nuanced manner, Matthew charts a middle course that allows the church to embrace people holding diverse opinions, while promoting "a chair of authoritative judgment" (p. 134) and incorporating a corrective against possible ecclesiastical abuses. He also gives to the teaching of Jesus a new theological status which prevents the absolutizing of the gospel as proclamation, even within the church.

One may quarrel here or there with Brown's interpretations. For me, the quarrels would be more a matter of degrees of emphasis than one of substance. Is there, for example, the degree of a difference that Brown suggests between Peter and Luke/Acts on the centrality of Israel? Has he given enough emphasis to the authority of the Risen Lord in the Matthean church? Is the Johannine perspective as individualistic, and therefore open to the dangers of constant schisms, as Brown says? No one may quarrel with Brown's basic premise, however; for no Christian who claims to be informed by the Bible can uphold one answer and neglect the others.

Of a more fundamental nature to the whole enterprise of Brown's book is the question whether the death of the apostles represented such a felt threat to the survival of these different Christian communities that these different Christian testimonies were written in order to insure survival. That the question of apostolic origin became an argumentative tool in the middle of the second century is clear enough. But that the gospels, or any other NT writings, were written because of the passing of the apostles, or the original eyewitnesses, is not supported by the evidence. Still, Brown's delineation of the pluralism enriching primitive Christianity is most helpful when what we are after is not only what the NT meant, but also what it means.