

11-1-1989

# The Beginnings of the Church

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### Recommended Citation

Malone, Mary T. (1989) "The Beginnings of the Church," *Consensus*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 2 , Article 16.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol15/iss2/16>

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## The Beginnings of the Church

Frederick J. Cwiekowski

New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988

222 pp.

How often do we hear phrases such as "We learn from the New Testament church..." or "the unity and harmony which characterized the early Christians". Certainly we have much to learn from the church of New Testament times, and we are justified in longing for the unity which is inseparable from our memory of our origins. Nevertheless, as this volume so continuously reminds us, we can no longer use these phrases in a univocal sense. The implication behind the phrases that there was once an original harmonious blueprint for all Christian communities is not supported by either biblical or historical research.

The author of this volume desires to "make available to a greater audience an overview of recent scholarly work on the beginnings of the church" (1). Since scholars differ among themselves on many aspects of early Christian life we should not expect a simple description. As Raymond E. Brown points out in the Foreword, "in the past there has *never* been unanimity or certitude on the material discussed here, and I suspect there never will be" (viii). We are, however, presented with a very readable account, based on a broad range of biblical research, of the origins and development of Christian communities decade by decade from the post-resurrection church of the 30's and 40's to the settled urban communities at the beginning of the second century.

Along the way, the familiar texts are harvested for clues to the life and faith of the early Christians living in very diverse communities along the coasts and trade routes of the Greco-Roman world. "By accepting the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as her canon (rule) of scripture, the church has chosen to live with diversity" (197). This is abundantly illustrated as we explore Jerusalem in the 30's, Antioch in the 50's, Ephesus and Rome in the 90's, to mention but a few. On the other hand, we are never allowed to forget that "the early Christians struggled to preserve a unity of faith and a community in the Spirit."

Of particular interest to many will be the tracing of the extraordinarily complex inter-relationships of Jews and Christians and particularly of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Our former simplistic two-fold division between Jews and Gentiles will be seen to give way to a much more diverse picture, represented to some small extent in the personalities of Stephen, Paul, Peter, and James. "Yet even at the end of the New Testament period there was no single Christian assessment of the relationship between the church and the synagogue that was universally held" (205).

The book is written primarily from the perspective and for the needs of Roman Catholics. The position adopted is the one labelled by Raymond E. Brown as "centrist". I suspect, though, that even many of these conclusions

will challenge the long held "pre-critical blue-print" approach so familiar in the past.

Of particular interest to Roman Catholics (though not exclusively to them) will be the tracing of the development of the Church at Rome and its character throughout its early life as a predominantly Jewish-Christian community. Matthew's delineation of the symbolic Petrine role is discussed in the context of the Antiochene community but, the author concludes, "There is no evidence that any one individual in the mid-80s actually functioned in this Petrine role for the universal church either at Antioch or anywhere else" (156).

One disappointment to this reviewer was the treatment of women in the text. On the one hand, the author presents us with much of the recent research on women as disciples, leaders of house-churches, widows, deacons (avoiding the trap of labelling them "deaconesses"), missionaries, co-workers, apostles, etc. The predominantly negative views of the Pastorals are discussed contextually. Nevertheless in a work based on so many conjectures and hypotheses, it is disappointing that the hypothetical reconstructions of feminist biblical scholars are not integrated as consistently as those of their male counterparts.

The volume concludes with a very helpful summary of seven major themes, including Unity and Diversity, the Local Church, The Role and Ministry of Women and Judaism and Christianity. The bibliography is sufficiently brief and specific to be of help to the students and other non-biblical specialists who will find this book extremely helpful.

This book is timely and exciting. It repeats the reflections of Karl Rahner and Walter Buhlmann on the coming of the "third age" of the church and comments: "we cannot use the New Testament or the early church to support or justify Christian division. Diversity within a basic unity, yes; division, no" (198). The author concludes with the hope that pervades the whole volume: "The diversity in the early church and the New Testament writings may be telling us that in that unity there may well be room for greater diversity than was once thought possible" (198).

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### **Tommy Douglas: The Road to Jerusalem**

Thomas H. McLeod and Ian McLeod

Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1987

xiv + 341 pp. \$24.95

Tommy Douglas, Baptist preacher and first socialist premier of Canada, is a life waiting for a definitive biography. This recent one, by a father-and-son team, will fill that gap for a number of years to come. The timeliness