

What kind of church did Jesus intend to establish?

ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY



By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Father Frederick Cwiekowski's *The Beginnings of the Church*, (Paulist Press, 1988; paperback, \$9.95) is an important and valuable survey of current biblical scholarship as it affects our understanding of the origins and early history of the church.

His fellow Silpician, Father Raymond Brown, one of this country's foremost New Testament scholars, describes the book as "intelligent," "respectful," and "centrist."

He assures us in his Foreword that he knows of no other popular work that covers the biblical background for Christology and ecclesiology as well and in so short a compass as Cwiekowski's. Neither do I.

Father Cwiekowski, a professor at St. Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore and a priest of the Archdiocese of Hartford, Conn., surely did not intend his work as a debunking enterprise. He carefully nuances whatever conclusions he draws from the findings of contemporary Catholic and Protestant biblical scholars.

Nonetheless, the scholarship that Father Cwiekowski surveys so well in this book thoroughly undermines what he calls "the pre-critical approach" to understanding the beginnings of the church.

Still assumed by many Catholics, including some in the hierarchy, to be the only orthodox view, the pre-critical approach is based on biblically and historically untenable assumptions.

It incorrectly assumes, for example, that Jesus clearly and deliberately intended to "found" the church as we have it today; that He "ordained" 12 Apostles as priests and then as bishops; that He explicitly instructed the Apostles to ordain successors, and to exclude women from ordination; that Peter was the founder and first bishop

of the church in Rome and was recognized from the beginning as the church's first pope; that the threefold ministry of bishop, priest, and deacon was directly established by Christ and then set in place right from the start everywhere in the early Christian world; that Jesus explicitly instituted the seven sacraments, even giving precise directions on how they were to be administered and by whom.

Did Jesus envision a church that would last for 20 centuries? Father Cwiekowski's survey discloses that "we have no evidence to support the view that Jesus envisioned a lengthy period with a span of centuries before the fulfillment of God's plan" (p. 44).

But didn't Jesus know everything about everything? After all, wasn't He divine? "Today biblical scholarship and sound contemporary Christology hold that Jesus' human knowledge was truly human and hence limited. Recognition of this limitation does not imply that Jesus was not divine; limitations in His human knowledge were fully a part of His being human" (p. 63).

Was the Last Supper the first ordination ceremony? "A careful reading of the texts does not indicate that at the Last Supper Jesus saw himself 'ordaining' the apostles or that he regarded them as 'priests' who were to preside at a sacrifice ..." (p. 58).

Did Jesus leave a precise blueprint by which the church would organize and structure itself, sacramentally, hierarchically, and pastorally? "Biblical evidence does not support the idea that Jesus in his ministry set up a new community with its own internal structures and its own identity distinct from other Jews" (p. 59).

Did Peter found the church in Rome and become its first bishop? "The strong case for Christianity's arrival (in Rome) in the early 40s (while Peter was still in Jerusalem) discredits the idea that Peter was the original missionary to Rome and the founder of the Roman church. Our best evidence, Paul's letter to the Romans, suggests that Peter did not have any significant association with the Roman church before A.D. 58" (p. 99).

Indeed, 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.

(Available evidence suggests that Rome at this time did not have any one such leading figure.)" (p. 156).

Given Jesus' supposed insistence on the exclusion of women from offices of pastoral leadership, many have assumed that women were silent and submissive in the early church. "But clearly Paul takes for granted that women pray and prophesy (1 Corinthians 11:5, 13) in the liturgical assembly and he finds no objection to this" (p. 125). There is even some evidence that women functioned as deacons in the early church e.g., Romans 16:1.

Did women, then, also function as priests in these early years? "Christians of the 50s lacked church buildings or temples, cult statues or traditional sacrifices. They had no cultic leaders who were called 'priests'" (p. 126). Women or men!

The point is that there was far more variety, diversity, complexity, and development in the early church than the authors of our 1940s and 1950s theology manuals and catechisms realized. Father Cwiekowski's *The Beginnings of the Church* is an important and useful corrective.

If you read no other book on theology this year, read this one.

Reflecting the Lord's resurrection in Christian life

By Father Albert Shamon
Catholic Courier columnist

Sunday's readings: (R3) John 20:1-9; (R2) Acts 10:34, 37-43; (R2) Colossians 3:1-4.

On Good Friday everybody was saying, "God is dead."

Then there was Easter. Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. She came "early in the morning on the first day of the week." She could not go to the tomb on the sabbath day, for the law of Moses forbade a journey on the sabbath. She had to wait till the first day of the week, Sunday. So eager was she to go to the tomb, she left early in the morning while it was still dark, somewhere between 3 and 6 a.m.

A WORD FOR SUNDAY



When she arrived at the tomb, she was astounded, for the large, circular stone, rolled like a cartwheel before the opening of the tomb to form a door, had been moved away. Before Mary arrived, an angel had picked up the mammoth stone and hurled it to the ground with such force that the earth quaked and the soldiers guarding the tomb fled in terror. It was God's way of seeing that the women coming to the tomb would not be molested.

When Mary saw the opened tomb, she jumped to the conclusion that someone had stolen the body of Jesus. Perhaps she surmised that the Jews, not content with crucifying Jesus, had taken His body to inflict further indignities upon it. Perplexed, half out of her mind with pitying love, she ran to tell Peter and John.

How great a man Peter must have been. Despite his cowardly denial of Jesus, he had the courage to face his companions and they were prepared to accept him as their leader still.

When they heard Mary's tale, Peter and John ran in breathless haste to the tomb. John, being the younger, got there first. He looked in, but did not enter. Peter, with typical impulsiveness, not only looked in when he arrived, but went in. He saw an empty tomb and the grave clothes. Yet he drew no conclusion.

It was John who saw and believed. He saw that the grave clothes were not disheveled and disarranged as robbers would have left them. Instead, they were lying there, collapsed in folds as if the body had

evaporated out of them. Then what had happened became clear to John. He believed. Jesus had risen! What convinced him was not anything he had read in Scripture, but what he had seen with his own eyes.

How great is love! Mary, who loved Jesus so much, was first at the tomb. John, whom Jesus loved so much and who loved Jesus so much, was the first to believe in the resurrection.

Jesus was not in the tomb because He is among the living. Christ is where He is most wanted: Mary Magdalene, the holy women, Peter and John wanted to see Him — and they saw Him. The high priest wanted Him dead, the Jews wanted Him dead, the mob wanted Him dead — and so they did not see Him.

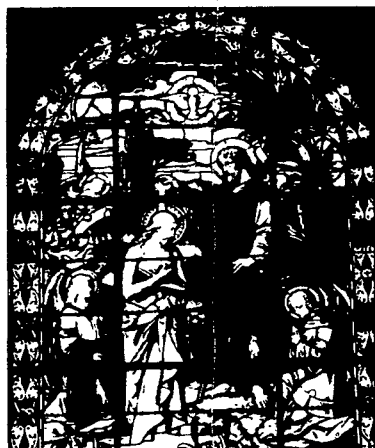
He was not in the tomb because He was busy elsewhere: busy revealing new wonders, new truths. He taught Mary Magdalene that love is stronger than death; he never forgets. He taught Peter that love forgives, so feed my lambs, feed my sheep.

Children and adults are always interested in the way stories end. "How did it end?" all ask. How did the story of Jesus' life end? Like our fairy tales: He lives happily ever after. Christ's life ended in glorious resurrection.

Please God, ours also shall. For that is why He is risen, that one day He may roll the stone away from our tombs so that we too shall live with Him happily ever after. Alleluia.

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