

Comments at Memorial Service for Raymond E. Brown

Union Theological Seminary, Fall 1998

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Ray Brown was my teacher, a man from whom I learned much while I was a doctoral student. And Ray Brown was a mentor, whose counsel, concern, and friendship remained a blessing throughout the years that followed. What does a student remember about a teacher? Often it is not a mass of detail, although there is no lack of detail in the countless pages that Ray has written. What I remember and what I ponder are the big things, Ray's most important commitments, and the relationships that shaped his life and work.

First, I think about Ray's relationship to the academy and the church. Accounts of Ray's career regularly mention his scholarly achievements and his role within the church. The list is so familiar that we are perhaps not surprised to find the two so thoroughly intertwined. And yet it is surprising. Because in the late twentieth century there is no necessary relationship between the academy and the church, between critical scholarship and theology, between specialized biblical studies and the interests of a broad community of faith. Ray moved with surprising grace between these two worlds, and it was, perhaps, his persistent engagement with scholars and with faith communities that helped to give his work its depth and abiding value. Good questions are often very basic questions, of the sort that people in any congregation or classroom might ask, like "Why did Jesus die?" When pursuing a good question Ray would work his way through a welter of technical issues and write large volume on the subject. But at the same time, he would also write something brief, simple, and straightforward in order to serve a broad community of non-specialists who were interested in Scripture.

Second, I think about Ray's work with both Roman Catholic and Protestant colleagues. Ray's chosen field of biblical studies is one of the most interesting places for people of different traditions to engage. Instead of bracketing theological perspectives out of their work, Ray invited people to bring differing perspectives to a common interpretive task. Moreover, when considering texts, Ray ranged over the centuries so that the views of those who shaped our traditions—Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin—could be considered and tested along with the views of modern scholars. Ray's approach reflected,

in part, his view of the biblical canon. The books within the canon speak with different voices. Ray respected the differing voices enough to take them seriously, and he took them seriously enough to deal with both their strengths and limitations. He could do the same with contemporary conversation partners, modeling the care and candor that foster healthy relationships among faith communities.

Finally, I think about Ray's relationship to God. When teaching doctoral students, Ray did not speak of faith in highly personal terms, yet his sense of living and working in the presence of God clearly informed what he did. Like other great Christian scholars, his life was an exercise in faith seeking understanding. Ray delighted in saying that instead of writing about the resurrection of the Messiah, he would prefer to explore the matter "face to face." My prayer is that Christ will mercifully grant that desire, and bring our teacher and friend to the resurrection and the life that knows no end.