

Recollections of Raymond E. Brown

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(Brief recollections offered at the Union Seminary memorial service in the fall of 1998. Oral presentation style preserved.)

At 11:00 on Tuesday and Thursday mornings in the fall of 1971, Ray Brown introduced me—and a hundred or so others—to the Gospel of John.

From those fall mornings until the day he died, Ray was a part of my life as teacher, as mentor, occasionally as co-conspirator, and surely as friend. As I think back over the decades of our acquaintance, I realize that most of what I know about Raymond Brown I learned that fall.

First, I learned of his deep passion for the biblical text. The text before him was simply the most interesting thing in the world, and only the most distracted could fail to be caught up in the adventure of exploring that text in the service of God's church.

Second, I learned the truly awesome capacity of Ray's memory. No detail escaped him, and no manuscript provided a safety net. Yet the memory never became a parlor trick to astonish or a weapon with which to intimidate; it was simply a gift that served the exploration of the text and the education of his students.

Then, of course, Ray's gift of clarity. In 1971 I couldn't have appreciated how difficult it is to understand Bultmann's theory of the composition of the Fourth Gospel, much less explain it to someone else. Yet Ray made it not only clear but, well, even interesting.

And all that intensity mingled with Ray's sense of humor. It was in that class that I learned the remark, "No one ever offered that hypothesis before. And there may be a very good

reason why no one did.” And then there was, “I just don’t know whether being in NT makes one strange, or whether only strange people go into the field.”

And the constant curiosity: “In your tradition, how would you handle this?” He would ask, and “What would your church say about that? And why are you here? What will you do next?”

On a later fall day, when I was beginning doctoral studies and money was in very short supply (a circumstance that will sound familiar to many of you) the mail arrived. With it came a check and a characteristically modest note saying, “I hope that you will accept this small gift. I have myself been so richly blessed.”

Truly Raymond Brown was richly blessed. And so are we.