

ECCLESIAL REPENTANCE: THE CHURCHES CONFRONT THEIR SINFUL PAST. By Jeremy M. Bergen. New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2011. Pp. xiv + 338. \$130; \$39.95.

In recent decades churches both Catholic and Protestant have frequently issued apologies for one or another of the sins of their past. Whether it be colonialist offenses against aboriginal peoples, the long and consistent history of anti-Semitism, or the more recent scandals of clerical sexual abuse of minors, many Christian churches have repented of their failures. Or have they? What is needed to make an apology genuine? What makes the difference between regret and repentance? Can, indeed, an apology be offered by a church today for the sins of long-dead members of the church? And perhaps most of all, how can we distinguish, if at all, between the sinful members of the church and the holy church itself? All these questions and more are considered in Bergen's book, a careful and sophisticated analysis of the phenomenon of ecclesial repentance based upon his 2008 doctoral dissertation.

B. moves smoothly between detailed examples of acts of ecclesial repentance, which dominate part one of the book, and constructive theological proposals that place repentance at the heart of the churches, which occupy the second and concluding part. The temptation, when we are confronted with examples of churches apologizing for this or that failing, may be to think that the apologies are occasioned at least in part by having been caught in the act (the clergy sex-abuse scandal), or perhaps that human history has arrived at a point where it can name as sinful what previous generations apparently took in stride (slavery, anti-Semitism); in either case a kind of grudging acceptance of the need to apologize may be anything but wholehearted. B., however, argues that because forgiveness in Christ is at the center of the communion of saints, repentance and reconciliation are very much what the churches are about. In a thorough piece of trinitarian theology relying heavily on the work of Robert Jenson, B. argues that the church is one community in history in which the Holy Spirit plays the vital roles of both binding the church to Christ and binding together the past, present, and future, so that the reconciliation granted in Christ may be seen to mark the church as a reconciling and reconciled community.

Here perhaps more work is to be done. It is not altogether clear in B.'s account exactly how the Spirit does the huge amount of work that B. assigns it, or where the action of the Spirit is located. If it is within the body of believers, as it seems it must be if the Spirit is not to be a *deus ex machina*, then where do the resources come from within the sinners to overcome, say, the Christian penchant for having slaves or for abusing Jews? Perhaps the reconciling work of the Spirit might be acting through

the process of human history, secular and religious, to correct the blindness of Christians to their own responsibilities to reconciliation, but on the *how* question B. is mostly silent.

While B.'s historical examples come from many traditions, the book as a whole leans more toward Catholic problems and Catholic solutions. He rightly points out that the historical problem for Protestants has been that their recognition that the church as a whole is sinful makes it hard to repent for particular concrete historical examples of sinfulness, whereas the Catholic tradition's insistence on the distinction between the sinful members of the church and the holy church itself, the spotless bride of Christ, often leaves those looking for and deserving of historical apologies largely unsatisfied. B. seems more interested in this second issue. The problem for the Catholic position, B. states, is that the result is an abstract church. Theologians as varied as Yves Congar and Hans Urs von Balthasar have questioned whether there can be a church if it has no members. Moreover, if the church claims historical agency, then the agents must be the members, and so, says B., we see a slow movement toward the final recognition that, yes, the church itself is sinful, because you simply cannot separate the church from its members. What makes his argument so helpful is the multiplicity of examples from both Protestant and Catholic traditions that support his own constructive case, without which the trinitarian process he outlines would itself be as abstract as the church without any members.

B. is to be congratulated for a thorough and intelligent contribution to an ongoing debate that rightly looks for a theological explanation for the legitimacy and necessity of ecclesial repentance.

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THE Gnostics: MYTH, RITUAL, AND DIVERSITY IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY. By David Brakke. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2010. Pp. xii + 164. \$29.95.

This is an excellent book on a complicated subject. Students of early Christianity have long struggled to understand diverse religious groups, generally labeled "gnostics," from the first two centuries of the Common Era. Although noted in the work of heresiologists such as Irenaeus of Lyons, the actual thoughts and practices of these circles have been difficult to discern so long as we have viewed them through the lenses of their opponents. In principle, the discovery of texts in the 20th century, such as those found at Nag Hammadi in 1945 and more recently the *Gospel of Judas*, give us more direct access to these early "heretics." Even so, scholars necessarily bring to their reading of these texts inherited pictures of the social and intellectual world in question, and the field has been alive with