

## Congregation or Community: Interacting with the 'Robinson-Knox' View of the Nature of the Church

*Michael Tinker*

### **The church as a gathering**

The view that the term 'church' in the New Testament is to be understood primarily as 'gathering' and refers to the perpetual *ekklesia* of God's people in heaven as well as earthly expressions of that in the local church has become known as the 'Robinson-Knox' view, after its chief proponents – Donald Robinson and Broughton Knox. More recently it has been pursued by Peter T. O'Brien. So Knox writes: 'Since Christ is now in heaven, it is there that the New Testament thinks of him as building his church, because the church of Christ is the assembly which he calls into being around himself.'<sup>1</sup> Knox understands this to be 'the primary reference of the word' in the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> Church, as an earthly expression of the heavenly congregation, is to be understood as the local congregation, that is, in terms of the people rather than a building, according to Robinson.<sup>3</sup> Peter O'Brien clarifies this: 'each of the various local churches are manifestations of that heavenly church, tangible expressions in time and space of what is heavenly and eternal.'<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that there are various nuances of this view, even between Robinson and Knox themselves and so there are some difficulties in talking of one view. We will seek to take some of the nuances into consideration, but will try to keep to the underlying pattern of argument in this area.

What appears to be agreed is that the local or visible *ekklesia* is at the centre of what it is to manifest the heavenly *ekklesia*.<sup>5</sup> This helpfully guards against the view that the denomination is an earthly expression of church.

However the question I want to ask is 'when is the local church not a church?'

---

*The question I want to ask is  
'when is the local church not a church?'*

---

The underlying view argues that the local *ekklesia* is primarily used in relation to the physical gathering. 'It would be of great assistance to the clarity of theological thinking if the word "church" were restricted in its use once more to the church which Christ assembles around himself in heaven and to the local manifestation in time and place of this one church of Christ.'<sup>6</sup> It sees church as an activity. This gathering, if it is to be more than the *ekklesia* that we find in Acts 19:32, has to bear certain marks. Clearly

---

<sup>1</sup> D. Broughton Knox, "The church" and "the denominations," *Sent by Jesus* (Banner of Truth, 1992), p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Donald W. B. Robinson, 'Church,' *New Bible Dictionary* (IVP, 1962), p. 228.

<sup>4</sup> Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, WBC 44 (Word, 1982), p. 61.

<sup>5</sup> Knox, p. 58

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 59, 64.

God's word is to be central, just as it was at the *ekklesia* of Sinai (Hebrews 12:22-24). It is the gospel of Christ's blood to which we are to listen. Holiness is also to be a mark of the church (Hebrews 12:14; 13:1-3; 13:16) as are prayer and praise (Hebrews 13:20; 12:22; 13:15).<sup>7</sup>

But when is a local church not a church? When does it cease to do these things and thus cease to be 'church'?

According to the view generally associated with Robinson-Knox, the church exists when the members gather together as an 'activity' centred around God's word. They enact these things together at that *ekklesia* and so express what it is to be the heavenly *ekklesia*. I agree with this. I do not think that church is anything *less* than this.

But is that *all* the local church is?

As was pointed out above, one mark of the church is holiness. There seems to be great emphasis on this being a mark of the gathered people of God. Paul, for instance, in Colossians tells this local *ekklesia* to set their minds on things above where they are in Christ, which is that heavenly *ekklesia*. The result of this is that they are to stop living self-centred lives and get on with loving each other. Holiness among the people of God as described by Paul is the very expression of what it is to be gathered around Christ in heaven. Indeed Knox states that 'The heavenly church is visible in its expression, the local congregation, and *in the visibility of the Christian character of its members*.'<sup>8</sup> This character is expressed in love and fellowship. But does Paul envisage this only taking place at particular meetings? It seems rather that to set our minds on where we are as part of the heavenly church impacts our whole life as *a community* beyond the official 'meeting'.

However this raises a question; Is community something different to 'church'? Can *ekklesia* only be expressed when the people gather for the preaching of God's Word and the administration of the sacraments, whereas fellowship is the expression of something else<sup>9</sup>? Or can 'gathering' be understood in a more *determinative* rather than *exhaustive* way? Are two or three Christians talking about God's word, loving and serving each other according to God's word while waiting for a bus in a bus shelter or walking in the park 'doing' or 'being' church?

The Robinson-Knox view is that *ekklesia* is to be understood primarily, if not exhaustively, in terms of the 'gathering'. The visible church does not exist beyond the gathering. (Hence Knox does not see the denomination as a church because it 'never gathers'.<sup>10</sup>) This does not mean that holiness is not important for the believer, but simply loving each other in a christlike way is not 'doing church'. Church is the gathering around God's word.

---

*The 'gathering' is determinative of what it is to be the ekklesia, but not exhaustive of its meaning.*

---

However it is my contention that although the *ekklesia* is not less than this gathering, it is in fact gloriously more than this gathering. The 'gathering' is *determinative* of what it is to be the *ekklesia*, but not *exhaustive* of its meaning.

### **The church as a holy community**

Central to this contention is the issue of God's people being holy and blameless, and how that affects our understanding of what the *ekklesia* is. In Ephesians 5:25-17 Paul tells us that Jesus loved the church and gave his

---

<sup>7</sup> Melvin Tinker, 'Refining the Reformers', *Churchman* 116:2 (2002), pp. 141-142; cf. Knox, p. 59

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 63.

life for her. It seems clear that *ekklesia* here is synonymous with God's people. The things that are said of the *ekklesia* are true of God's people. The *ekklesia* is Christ's body (v. 23); the *ekklesia* submits to Christ (v. 24); and the *ekklesia* is the object of Christ's passion (v. 25). But to what end does Christ give himself for the church? Paul says it is to 'make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless' (v. 26-27). The *ekklesia*, then, is a people who are changed by God's word into a holy and blameless people. This is in fact where Paul starts his letter. It is the saints, the faithful in Christ, who have been chosen before the creation of the world 'to be holy and blameless in his sight' (1:4).

But what does this look like? Paul tells us in chapters 4-5 of Ephesians. In 4:24 Paul writes that these Christians have already been taught to 'put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.' To do this they must first 'put off' their old self (v. 22) where they were driven by their 'deceitful desires'. Our old way of living could be summed up in one word - 'selfishness'. We would lie (v. 25). We would use unwholesome talk through which we would put other people down and thus build ourselves up (v. 29). We would indulge in bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander and every kind of malice (v. 31). All of these things place *us* firmly at the centre of our lives, and they belong to the old way of living.

But Paul says we are a new people, called to be holy and blameless. The way we are to live now is the complete opposite of our old way of living. Now we are to speak truth because we are one body (v. 25). We should work hard so we can give to others (v. 28). We should always seek to build other people up (v. 29). And we should be kind and compassionate, forgiving each other (v. 32).

Being 'holy and blameless', being 'imitators of God' (5:1), is all about how you live your life (5:15). It is about living *other person-centred* lives, loving each other in the way Christ loved us (5:2). Holiness is clearly not something you can do on your own, but is something worked out as a community.

So if Christ is seeking for his *ekklesia* to be holy and blameless, and Paul says that we are to live *lives* that are holy and blameless, then clearly being the *ekklesia* that Christ has rescued and is washing through his word is about the whole of life. We cannot be holy and blameless simply when we gather in some larger setting. Also it is not as individuals that we become holy and blameless. It is in the nitty gritty of the life of a community that we forgive, because it is only in the nitty gritty of the life of a community that we are likely to offend. The *ekklesia* is the people of God that Christ has rescued who are to live lives together, loving each other. As such, they are the light that exposes the darkness of lives lived without Christ (5:8-15). They are an alternative community or household (the imagery used in 2:19-22). It is about that word washing us as we talk about it with each other, as our lives are marked by thankfulness and willing submission and humility before each other (5:19-21).

### **A holy community in the whole of life**

It is clear from the rest of the Bible that God's people are to be a holy people and this is something lived out in the whole of life *as* God's people.

The ones who were an example to the people of God in the Old Testament are called 'blameless' (Noah, Genesis 6:9; Abraham, Genesis 17:1; David, 2 Samuel 22:24; Psalm 18:22-24; Job, Job 1:1). The people of God are called to be blameless as an outworking of the agenda setting *ekklesia* at Sinai (Deuteronomy 18:13). It is those who are blameless who will dwell in the sanctuary of the Lord, who will inherit the land, which is

inextricably tied to being part of God's people (Ephesians 5:5; see also Psalm 15:2, 37:18, 101:6; Proverbs 2:21, 20:7, 28:10).

As we come to the New Testament we find this theme of communal holiness in the whole of life continuing. In 1 Thessalonians 2:10 Paul talks about how he and the others who came with him were 'holy, righteous and blameless' among the Thessalonians. We know from Ephesians that this means they lived lives of love, forgiving and caring for each other. They modelled 'church' in front of these new Christians.

It is clearly the future hope of God's people that they will one day fully be 'holy and blameless'. This is Paul's desire for the Thessalonians in 3:13. This is also Paul's prayer in Philippians 1:9-11. In 2 Peter 3:13 Peter writes that Christians are looking forward to a new heaven and new earth which will be the home of righteousness. But these are not simply future hopes: they impact directly on the present reality. So Paul continues in Philippians 2:15 that Christians are to work out their salvation by obeying God, not being self-centred but having the same *other person-centred* attitude as Christ. This will mean that they become 'blameless and pure', not only in the future of the new heaven and new earth, but 'in [this] crooked and depraved generation.' It is the same language as that used in Deuteronomy 32:5 where it is *Israel* who have become a 'warped and crooked generation'. God's people have failed to be who they should be. The way to be the people of God, however, is to obey God's word (Deuteronomy 32:46-47). This obedience is about the whole of life: 'by them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess' (Deuteronomy 32:47). Peter likewise says that the future hope is something to be lived out in the here and now. 2 Peter 3:14 says 'since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.'

---

*Are we 'doing' church when we are loving  
and caring for each other ... at a bus stop?  
The answer must be 'Yes'.*

---

God's people are called to be holy and blameless together. It is something that will be perfected when Christ comes again, and it is something to be worked out in the here and now. But being holy and blameless has a very 'earthy' definition. It is about living lives that are washed by God's word, no longer living for self, but for others – loving, caring and forgiving. It is to this that the people of God are called. It is to this that the *ekklesia* of Christ is called, according to Paul in Ephesians.

So, are we 'doing' church when we are loving and caring for each other, when we are living lives that are being changed by the word, even if we are just standing at a bus stop? If being the *ekklesia* is about becoming 'holy and blameless' in this way, as Paul writes, then the answer must be 'Yes'.

---

*Church is not less than a meeting,  
just as the nation of Israel was not  
less than the ekklesia at Sinai.  
But it is gloriously more.*

---

Church is not less than a meeting, just as the nation of Israel was not less than the *ekklesia* at Sinai. But it is gloriously more. The pattern of life of the old covenant people of God was set at the *ekklesia* of Sinai. It was the defining moment of their history. The pattern of life of the new covenant people of God is set as we gather together around the teaching of

God's word on a Sunday (or whatever day you meet). That *ekklesia* is determinative of what it is to be the people of God as we listen to God's word and seek to apply it. As such, we can properly be called the *ekklesia*, 'the gathering', for this gathering sets the agenda of our lives together. But that does not exhaust what it is to be *ekklesia*. Church continues throughout the week as we are washed by that word, working that out in practice in our daily lives together, becoming the holy, blameless people of God, the bride of Christ, the *ekklesia*, that we have been called to be.

*Michael Tinker is an assistant minister with The Crowded House, Sheffield. He is soon to co-lead a new church plant.*

### **Northern Training Institute**

The Northern Training Institute provides an affordable, Bible college-level programme of study that enables students to integrate theological training with involvement in ministry through residential weeks, seminar days and guided reading. The Institute also promotes theological reflection on the practice of mission and ministry.

The Northern Training Institute papers are a vehicle for disseminating this reflection. The views expressed in the papers do not necessarily reflect those of the Institute.

[info@northerntraininginstitute.org](mailto:info@northerntraininginstitute.org)

[www.northerntraininginstitute.org](http://www.northerntraininginstitute.org)