

Ecclesia as Gathering Only? Evaluating the Use of Scripture in Proposals of the “Knox-Robinson Ecclesiology”

C. RYAN FIELDS*

Broughton Knox and Donald Robinson, Sydney Anglicans serving and writing in the second half of the twentieth century, offered various theological proposals regarding the nature of the church that stressed the priority of the local over the translocal. The interdependence and resonance of their proposals led to an association of their work under the summary banner of the “Knox-Robinson Ecclesiology.” Their dovetailed contribution offers in many ways a compelling understanding of the nature of the ecclesia spoken of in Scripture. In this paper I introduce, summarize, and evaluate the Knox-Robinson ecclesiology with a particular eye to Knox’s and Robinson’s use of Scripture in authorizing their theological proposals. I argue that while they provide an important corrective to the inflation of the earthly translocal dimension of the church, they are not ultimately persuasive in their claim that the New Testament knows only the church as an earthly/heavenly gathering.

Keywords: *Broughton Knox, Donald Robinson, Knox-Robinson ecclesiology, ecclesiology, Sydney Anglicanism, local church, universal church, use of Scripture*

In 1948, a young Donald Robinson met with the ecclesiological reflections of the inestimably influential theologian Karl Barth, an encounter that was to affect Robinson’s understanding of the church for the remainder of his career. Barth had presented a paper at the

* The Reverend C. Ryan Fields is a PhD candidate at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in theological studies, and is ordained in the Evangelical Free Church of America. His research focuses on ecclesiology, specifically the church’s catholicity and the Free Church tradition.

inaugural meeting of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam entitled “The Living Congregation of the Living Lord Jesus Christ” (1948), and Robinson found it quite compelling, particularly Barth’s stunning claim (given its declaration at the inauguration of the worldwide ecumenical movement) that “the Church is neither the invisible fellowship, nor the visible community, of all those who believe in Christ; nor is it a monarchical, aristocratic, or democratic form of the latter. The Church is the ‘event’ in which two or three are gathered together in the name of Christ. . . . The primary, normal, and visible form of this event is the *local congregation*.”¹ Barth’s seminal work and his particular conception of the church,² combined with Robinson’s astute exegesis of the New Testament, would become the launching pad for what would emerge over the second half of the twentieth century: the “Knox-Robinson ecclesiology.”

Broughton Knox, who served as Principal of Moore Theological College from 1959 to 1985 and was informally known as the “father of contemporary Sydney Anglicanism,” and Donald Robinson, Lecturer and Vice Principal at Moore College from 1959 to 1973 and Anglican Archbishop of Sydney from 1983 to 1992, were what came to be known as “Sydney Anglicans.” Over the course of their lifetimes, they offered various theological proposals regarding the nature of the biblical *ecclesia* that stressed the priority of the local church. The interdependence and resonance of their proposals, along with their combined long-standing impact on Sydney Anglicanism, led to a deep association of their work under a summary banner. Their dovetailed ecclesiological convictions are not well known outside of Sydney Anglican circles, and yet in many ways they offer a compelling understanding of the nature of the church grounded in Scripture. The fact that Knox and Robinson belong to the Anglican tradition (rather than the Free Church tradition, as we might expect, given their local church emphasis) makes their proposals particularly interesting, especially when we note that Anglican ecclesiology does not tend to emphasize the local church over the universal church, and when we

¹ Karl Barth, “The Living Congregation of the Living Lord Jesus Christ,” in *Man’s Disorder and God’s Design*, vol. 1, *The Universal Church in God’s Design* (London: SCM Press, 1948), 73.

² A further description of the encounter with and influence of Barth can be found in Chase Kuhn, “The Ecclesiology of Donald Robinson & David Broughton Knox: A Presentation, Analysis, and Theological Evaluation of Their Thought on the Nature of the Church” (PhD diss., University of Western Sydney, 2014), 74–75.

consider the extent of Anglican involvement in the later twentieth-century ecumenical movement.

Kevin Vanhoozer helpfully summarizes their proposals thusly: “There is no evidence of a ‘third place,’ an earthly ecclesial entity larger than a local congregation. The local congregation clearly gets the bulk of the New Testament authors’ attention . . . [while Knox and Robinson] place particular emphasis on the heavenly church. The ascended Christ is in heaven, and it is the heavenly church that is one in Christ.”³ Chase Kuhn effectively condenses their collective proposals down to a single sentence: “There is no earthly ecclesial reality beyond the local church.”⁴ For conceptual clarity we can delineate the nature of the church being discussed into three dimensions: (1) the earthly local (local assembly) church, (2) the earthly trans-local (regional, denominational, or global aggregate) church, and (3) the heavenly translocal (universal aggregate/assembly) church.⁵ The Knox-Robinson ecclesiology is thus the affirmation of dimensions numbers 1 and 3 (with the insistence that number 1 is an earthly, temporary manifestation of number 3, and that number 3 is indeed an assembly rather than an aggregate) while denying number 2 properly exists as “church.”

Seeing their proposals in sum, one might wonder why we should care. I hope to demonstrate, by assessing the use of Scripture in the Knox-Robinson ecclesiology, that their proposals offer an important corrective to both the traditional Protestant doctrine of the nature of the church (which has assumed the three ecclesial dimensions above) as well as certain underlying assumptions of the contemporary ecumenical movement. To the extent that their proposals are persuasive, they call for a deeper prioritization of the local church (versus the “global church,” denominations, and so on) and ultimately impact what we confess (and even *if we can* confess) when we declare our belief in “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.” Thus I will seek in this paper to further introduce, summarize, and evaluate the

³ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 197.

⁴ Kuhn, “Ecclesiology of Robinson & Knox,” 209.

⁵ It should be noted here that this is only one of several ways that the nature of the church has been delineated in church history, and that this framework blends elements that are analyzed more typically through the visible/invisible, militant/triumphant, and local/universal frameworks. A full tracing out of the interrelationship of these conceptions is advised but is beyond the scope of this paper.

Knox-Robinson ecclesiology with a particular eye to Knox's and Robinson's construal and use of Scripture in authorizing their theological proposals. I will argue that while providing an important corrective to the inflation of the earthly translocal church dimension (number 2 above), Knox and Robinson are not ultimately persuasive in their claim that the New Testament knows and speaks *only* of the earthly (local) and heavenly (translocal) assemblies. That is, they can't entirely eliminate the legitimacy of dimension number 2, for ultimately Scripture authorizes us to be able to speak of the earthly translocal church as an aggregate.

Method for Assessing Use of Scripture in Theological Proposals

Unfortunately there has been little attention given (in certain circles at least) to assessing the way Scripture is *used* to authorize theological proposals and ultimately to determine, based on established criteria, whether a particular use is proper and compelling. This is due in large part to an emphasis on assessing doctrinal faithfulness (whether the author and the proposal itself claim and exhibit a high view of Scripture) and hermeneutical rigor (whether proper interpretive principles are employed in seeking to understand and expound the meaning of a biblical passage) over method of argumentation in theological proposals.

But Scripture speaks of the proper *handling* of God's Word (see as just one primary example 2 Tim. 2:15), and thus inherently assumes that more (but not less) than orthodox doctrine and proper hermeneutics are required of God's people, especially those who serve as pastor-teachers of the church. As example after example from church history make abundantly clear, many handlings of Scripture can be characterized more as "abuse" rather than proper "use," even when orthodox doctrine and proper hermeneutics were operational.⁶ In addition, assessing the use of Scripture in theological proposals assists us in achieving methodological clarity, for as Vanhoozer has argued, "it is one thing to establish what a text meant/means, quite another to decide whether, or how, that meaning may be brought to bear 'authorizingly' on a theological proposal . . . [and thus] to say what it entails

⁶ The example of the Bible being used to defend the institution of slavery and the horrendous slave trade of the nineteenth century is a particularly infamous case.

for the church today.”⁷ To summarize then: as God’s people we need to know not just what Scripture *is* and what Scripture *means*, we also must know what it is *for* and how to properly use it in keeping with its inherent ecclesial authority. Thus we must ask this of the Knox-Robinson proposals (among other important questions): Do they exhibit a proper and compelling use of Scripture?

David Kelsey, in his book *Proving Doctrine: The Uses of Scripture in Modern Theology*, helps us understand more exactly what we mean when we speak of Scripture’s use in theological proposals. Kelsey presents his framework as entirely descriptive (though there is good reason to believe that he sneaks normative assumptions into his argument), aiming to demonstrate that theologians use Scripture to authorize their proposals (often under the prime directive of “being biblical”) in a wide variety of ways. In short, Kelsey goes to great lengths to show that methods of leveraging biblical authority for theological proposals are more diversified than is often admitted. Toward this end, Kelsey provides us with four diagnostic questions we can ask of a theological proposal to help us delineate the different ways Scripture is employed within it. Those questions are the following: (1) What aspect of Scripture does a theologian take as authoritative? (2) What makes this aspect authoritative? (3) What is the logical force (that is, the role in argument) of a particular biblical text that displays this aspect? (4) How is Scripture brought to bear so that the authoritative aspect of the text gets transferred to the theological proposal? The concerns inherent in these questions can helpfully be reframed as three questions concerning text, context, and pretext: (1) *Text*: How does a theologian view/construe Scripture? (combining questions 1 and 2 above) (2) *Context*: How does a theologian use Scripture in an argument? (combining questions 3 and 4 above), and (3) *Pretext*: On what basis does a theologian decide to view and use Scripture? (asking what lies “behind” or “before” questions 1–4 above). We will work with these latter three questions in the remainder of our analysis.

Question 1 addresses the reality that while all Christian theologians want to “be biblical” in their proposals in some sense, the reality is that much more needs to be said. Kelsey helpfully uses the analogy of someone exclaiming, “Play ball!” For the proclamation to have meaning, more needs to be said (what sort of ball, rules of the game,

⁷ Personal conversation with Kevin Vanhoozer, fall 2016. I am indebted to Vanhoozer for the helpful distillation and reframing of Kelsey’s proposal that follows.

and so on). So it is with a theologian claiming that Scripture is her authority for a theological proposal.⁸ Particularly, the “more” that needs to be expressed is what aspect of Scripture is taken as authoritative (doctrinal content, revelatory story, power of symbols, or something else); that is, how one construes Scripture to be a certain thing and to exercise authority in a certain way. Question 2 seeks to clarify how theologians appeal to Scripture in different places during the course of a theological argument (in the roles of data, warrant, and backing specifically), being aware that appeals to Scripture as data will be controlled by how Scripture is construed from question 1.⁹ Question 3 seeks to step behind the construal of Scripture and the process of theological argument to assess a theologian’s pretextual commitments. Kelsey describes these commitments as “discrimen,”¹⁰ and they culminate in what he refers to as an imaginative construal, a sort of “first theology” that involves our judgment (before we engage Scripture or seek to use it in argument) about how God relates to the world and to the believing community in and through Scripture. Kelsey believes there are controls that regulate these imaginative construals, primarily the theologian’s participation in the life of the church and the determinedness of the patterns found within Scripture.¹¹ His work makes a strong case that theologians employ Scripture differently because they are working, in Vanhoozer’s words, “with different root metaphors that imaginatively construe the complex God-Scripture-church” in different arrangements.¹² Kelsey’s questions thus insightfully provide a helpful diagnostic for describing and accounting for the different ways that theologians seek to be biblical in their proposals.

But ultimately theologians must move from a descriptive mode (à la Kelsey) to a normative mode that is able to *evaluate* others’ use of Scripture (and our own) in terms of criteria for *proper* use of Scripture in theological proposals. If there is in fact more than one way

⁸ David H. Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine: The Uses of Scripture in Modern Theology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 109–10.

⁹ Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine*, 126–28.

¹⁰ Vanhoozer helpfully summarizes Kelsey’s concept here as a “cluster of interrelated criteria [that coalesce in] a single imaginative judgment as to what Christianity is all about . . . [including] how God is thought to be present and related to Scripture . . . [and] how Scripture is being used in the church’s common life.” Personal conversation with Kevin Vanhoozer, fall 2016.

¹¹ Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine*, 196–97.

¹² Personal conversation with Kevin Vanhoozer, fall 2016.

to use the Bible to authorize theological proposals, then we need to know how to go about determining legitimate from illegitimate uses of Scripture. Verses like 1 Timothy 1:19, for instance, make it abundantly clear that those who have shipwrecked their faith have exhibited abuse rather than proper use of Scripture, no matter what they might claim. This is especially necessary since theological proposals ought to go “beyond the Bible” in the best sense, refusing to merely replicate, crassly innovate, or simply translate biblical propositions into contemporary idiom or across cultural barriers, but rather to draw out what is inherent and incipient in the canon of Scripture for our generation with its unique questions and concerns, ultimately that we might live as faithful disciples in our time and place. This requires, according to Vanhoozer, “ultimately a type of creative understanding . . . not [producing] innovations but rather progressively [discovering] the full meaning potential of the divine authorial discourse intrinsic to and implicit in the Bible.”¹³ Thus, we need principles to evaluate others’ use of Scripture and to orient our own, providing guides (positively) and guardrails (negatively) for any use of Scripture that seeks to authorize theological proposals toward proper doctrinal development. I believe that Vanhoozer’s threefold criteria of canon sense (“knowing who and where you are in relation to the whole drama of redemption”), catholic sensibility (“reading with the Spirit-led church, the community of the canon extended in space and time”), and contextual sensitivity (“[seeing] one’s context as the stage and setting for new performances of the same ongoing drama of redemption”) are a fitting summary of these principles and serve as an effective guide for proper use of Scripture, that the church might faithfully live out the gospel in our particular time and place.¹⁴

Summarizing the Knox-Robinson Ecclesiology

I now move to the topic at hand, the Knox-Robinson ecclesiology. It is important to remember that there are multiple proposals to summarize and assess in doing so. Knox and Robison were distinct theologians (Knox primarily a systematician, Robison primarily an exegete) who articulated their own ecclesiologies, which, at certain

¹³ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “May We Go Beyond What Is Written After All?” in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 84.

¹⁴ Personal conversation with Kevin Vanhoozer, fall 2016.

points, deviated from one another. For instance, Kuhn has observed that there were “substantial differences” between Knox and Robinson in terms of the exact relationship between the earthly and heavenly gatherings, the primary purpose of these gatherings, and the relationship between Israel and the church.¹⁵ He elaborates by noting, “Robinson’s thoughts . . . are underdeveloped without the theological refinement that Knox provided. Similarly . . . the theological propositions that Knox developed need the exegetical support provided by Robinson, as well as his biblical theological developments, in order to gain traction as a viable biblical ecclesiology.”¹⁶ He deftly observes that “Robinson [gave] us a detailed biblical theology of the church, grounded in careful semantic work . . . [while] Knox built upon the conclusions of Robinson’s biblical conclusions and developed them more systematically.”¹⁷ But, despite the ways in which the theologians differed and the manner in which their proposals covered divergent territory and exhibited varying strengths and weaknesses, Kuhn is right to ultimately conclude that “there is indeed good reason to hold to a model [that takes] the two ecclesiologies as complementary. . . . They are strongest when considered together.”¹⁸ As the first major study of the combined work of Knox and Robinson, examining specifically the question of the legitimacy of the Knox-Robinson ecclesiological synthesis, Kuhn’s conclusion carries a lot of weight and makes a compelling case for why these theologians and their ecclesiological proposals ought to be evaluated simultaneously.¹⁹ I will thus proceed by examining their work separately but with an eye for how their distinctive insights work in tandem.

Knox: Ecclesia as Gathering around Christ

A summary of Knox’s ecclesiology begins with the fact that in Knox’s conception, the church is to be understood as the gathering

¹⁵ Kuhn, “Ecclesiology of Robinson & Knox,” 248–50.

¹⁶ Kuhn, “Ecclesiology of Robinson & Knox,” 250.

¹⁷ Kuhn, “Ecclesiology of Robinson & Knox,” 250.

¹⁸ Kuhn, “Ecclesiology of Robinson & Knox,” 246.

¹⁹ Kuhn’s dissertation goes to great lengths to describe Knox’s and Robinson’s close working relationship and mutual dependence on each other’s work, although he makes it clear that Robinson produced the more foundational work and was the more prodigious of the pair; Knox was more the respected senior and the charismatic, public spokesman for their increasingly aligned and mutually dependent ecclesial position.

of believers around Christ, primarily in heaven where Christ is, but secondarily on earth as the Holy Spirit gathers the local assembly and gives physical expression to the spiritual (or, better yet, heavenly) reality. These heavenly and earthly gatherings are characterized by a reciprocity of presence: believers are present spiritually in the heavenly places where Christ is present physically, and believers are present physically in the earthly gatherings where Christ is present spiritually. The purpose for these gatherings is fellowship, meeting with Christ and the Spirit of Christ present within each other under the authority of the word of God over the congregation. The local assembly is the only legitimate church on earth and there is no institutional authority naturally set over the local church, though the church may willingly choose to fellowship and partner with other churches in a larger institution or denomination.²⁰ In terms of Knox's methodological approach in setting forth this ecclesiology, Kuhn notes that "Knox . . . moved beyond the parameters of biblical theology to examine how these thematic developments interacted with the broader scope of Christian doctrine, and how these doctrines have been understood in the history of Christianity. . . . But for Knox, this systematic approach always involved the foundation of biblical theology."²¹

Tracing Knox's work through the years is elucidating. As early as 1955 we see him, amid a growing ecumenical tide and an emphasis on increased Anglican ecumenical involvement, issuing such statements as, "The ideal of one voice speaking for the whole Church continent-wide, or world-wide, is attractive to many minds. It is the papal ideal. But a truer Christian ideal is local autonomy."²² In a 1970 radio broadcast, Knox appealed to Hebrews 12:22–24, among other passages, to make the case that "the heavenly and earthly are not two fellowships, or two gatherings, one unseen, the other local and visible, but they are the same fellowship both heavenly in God's presence and at the same time local and physical because we live in a physical environment."²³ By the end of his career, his characteristic note of the primacy of fellowship was on full display in pieces such as "The Biblical Concept of Fellowship," where he argued on the basis of 1 John 1:3–6, Hebrews

²⁰ The preceding summary was derived from Kuhn, "Ecclesiology of Robinson & Knox," 217–18.

²¹ Kuhn, "Ecclesiology of Robinson & Knox," 166.

²² David Knox, *D. Broughton Knox: Selected Works*, vol. 2, *Church and Ministry*, ed. Kirsten Birkett (Sydney: Matthias Media, 2003), 2.

²³ Knox, *Selected Works*, 2:21.

2:12, and Matthew 18:19–20 that fellowship with God and one another is something that the earliest Christians testified to as a delightful reality that culminates in the corporate gathering.²⁴ This theme was also expressed strongly in “The Church, the Churches and the Denominations of the Churches” (1989), where he noted that “being in Christ’s presence, through his Spirit present in them, naturally draws Christians into each other’s company. They meet together in his name, and Christ is there in each. Thus the local church forms spontaneously as an expression, in the sphere of time and space, of the eternal reality of fellowship with God which each has, and who is in each.”²⁵

Knox also made connections between his proposed ecclesiology and the broader Protestant tradition of which he was a part, noting that

it will be seen that [my] doctrine of the church is the same as the traditional protestant doctrine of the universal, invisible church of Christ, but it gives it its biblical basis and completes it by making it clear that it is the church of Christ, that is the gathering of Christ—for the word “church” always means gathering—round Christ where he is in heaven, where we also are according to the teaching of the New Testament.²⁶

Whether it was reveling in Christ’s words that where two or three are gathered he was there with them (Matt. 18:20), or glorying in the fact that Christ was leading worship from the midst of the assembly (Heb. 2:12), Knox never tired of emphasizing that the New Testament term *ecclesia* meant gathering and that that gathering was always and forever around Christ.

Robinson: Ecclesia as Active Gathering of God’s People

Turning now to summarize Robinson’s ecclesiological proposals, it is immediately obvious that they demonstrated some distinct emphases from those of Knox. There was, of course, similar content found in Robinson’s asserting the priority of the local/heavenly church, but Robinson differed from Knox in tending to emphasize

²⁴ Knox, *Selected Works*, 2:57.

²⁵ Knox, *Selected Works*, 2:89.

²⁶ Quoted in Kuhn, “Ecclesiology of Robinson & Knox,” 178–79.

ecclesia in the New Testament as a verbal noun describing an activity rather than an identity (for example, God's people "churched on occasion" rather than "are the church"). Like Knox, he put a priority on Christ's presence in the place of gathering, whether heavenly or earthly, believing that the earthly gave physical expression to the heavenly. But unlike Knox, Robinson emphasized the differences that existed between earthly and heavenly: the earthly was multiform and intermittent, the heavenly was uniform and continuous (and leading to the initially odd-sounding conclusion that the church comes in and out of existence on earth but remains in constant existence in heaven). Robinson also held that the church is not the "new Israel" (keeping Gentiles and Jews distinct in the economy of redemption) and that the task of the church is to properly gather under the authority of the word, not to evangelize (something Christians were to do apart from their gathering as the church).²⁷

Like Knox, Robinson expressed his characteristic emphases early and often in his career. In 1954, on the question of the World Council of Churches and his diocese's potential involvement, he wrote simply, "The New Testament knows only one unit of the Visible Church, namely, the local worshipping community."²⁸ In his 1959 paper "The Church in the New Testament," he makes similar appeals as Knox to Matthew 18:20 in order to illustrate that "the church is where Christ is. On earth, that is where two or three are gathered together in His name; in heaven, it is where He is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."²⁹

As his career progressed, Robinson became more focused on the semantics of the New Testament. Perhaps most significant was his article "Church" in the *New Bible Dictionary* (1962), where some of his most characteristic stances can be found. For instance, he notes that "'church' in the NT . . . renders Gk. *Ekklesia*, which mostly designates a local congregation of Christians and never a building. Although we often speak of these congregations collectively as the NT church or

²⁷ The preceding summary was derived from Kuhn, "Ecclesiology of Robinson & Knox," 118–19.

²⁸ Donald Robinson, *Donald Robinson: Selected Works*, vol. 1, *Assembling God's People*, ed. Peter G. Bolt and Mark D. Thompson (Sydney: Australian Church Record, 2008), 4.

²⁹ Robinson, *Selected Works*, 1:213.

the early church, no NT writer uses *ekklesia* in this collective way. An *ekklesia* was a meeting or assembly.”³⁰ Or again,

“Church” is not a synonym for “people of God”; it is rather an *activity* of the “people of God.” Images such as “aliens and exiles” (1 Pet. 2:11) apply to the people of God in the world, but do not describe the church, i.e. the people assembled with Christ in the midst (Matt. 18:20; Heb. 2:12). . . . In Acts, James, 3 John, Revelation and the earlier Pauline letters, “church” is always a particular local congregation. . . . But in the later Colossians and Ephesians Paul generalizes his use of “church” to indicate, not an ecumenical church, but the spiritual and heavenly significance of each and every local “body” which has Christ as its “head.”³¹

He also began important investigations into the linguistic background of the New Testament, especially as it related to the crucial term *ecclesia*. For instance, in “The Church of God: Its Form and Its Unity” (1965), Robinson notes,

The Greek word *ekklesia*, which is the word translated *church* in the New Testament, meant a *meeting* or an *assembly*. . . . In a Greek city-state, the citizens, the *demos*, came together in regular assembly for certain purposes. This assembly was the *ekklesia* of the *demos*. The terms were not synonymous. The *demos*—the people—was a constant, on-going thing. But the *ekklesia* was an *intermittent function* of the people.³²

These investigations led him to some conclusions that were counter-intuitive yet followed (in his view) from New Testament semantics, conclusions such as the following: “It is not too much to say that the church on earth does not exist, or is not visible, except in the actual assembly of believers. . . . Although an earthly church is an expression of the heavenly church, it has this character only in so far as, and only as often as, there is an actual meeting.”³³

³⁰ Robinson, *Selected Works*, 1:222.

³¹ Robinson, *Selected Works*, 1:222–23.

³² Robinson, *Selected Works*, 1:231.

³³ Robinson, *Selected Works*, 1:236.

One particularly interesting aspect of the Robinson corpus is a document that provides his own critical reflection on his work and legacy at the end of his career, a piece entitled, “‘The Church’ Revisited: An Autobiographical Fragment” (1989). In it, Robinson looks back upon the whole of his work, clarifying the cultural climate in which he put forward his proposals and “[tracing] something of [his] own progress in this area of theological formulation.”³⁴ He clarifies that, though he stands by his proposals, he wants it to be known that they were developed amid two major ecclesiastical activities that he and Knox were heavily engaged with: the emergence of the ecumenical movement and the call for a new constitution for the Church of England in Australia. In both of these arenas, “large claims were being made for ‘the church,’ allegedly on the basis of biblical truth, which did not always stand up to exegetical scrutiny. . . . [We desired to make clear that] theologically speaking, a body like the Church of England [or the global church] . . . was simply not a church in any sense in which *ekklesia* is used in the New Testament.”³⁵ This article is invaluable both in clarifying the content, context, and cohesiveness of the Knox-Robinson proposals (for Robinson makes it clear throughout that he and Knox operated together in many respects) and in providing the sense of what Robinson believed he was accomplishing and thought were his greatest insights and achievements.

Evaluating the Knox-Robinson Ecclesiology

I now turn to an evaluation of the Knox-Robinson ecclesiology, which I will offer primarily by assessing the construal and use of Scripture in their proposals as further revealed by their interpreters (primarily Chase Kuhn and Michael Jensen) and critics (primarily Graham Cole and Kevin Giles). We begin with the question of construal: What aspect of Scripture did Knox and Robinson take to be authoritative? That is, how did they construe Scripture to be a certain thing and to exercise authority in a certain way? Certainly we can start by affirming that both Knox and Robinson viewed the semantic content of Scripture to be authoritative; any proposal that appeals to the precise meaning of a specific (albeit central) New Testament term (lexically as well as within its biblical and cultural-linguistic context) as

³⁴ Robinson, *Selected Works*, 1:259.

³⁵ Robinson, *Selected Works*, 1:264, 267.

much as they do betrays this vantage point. But it would be a mistake to describe Knox and Robinson's construal of Scripture as a compendium of lexical studies waiting to be pursued, its authority exercised only when such studies are properly completed. On the contrary, both of them articulated an understanding that Scripture was ultimately, as Kuhn has summarized it, "the metanarrative of the Old and New Testaments [as] the story of God's engagement with humanity," specifically the story of God *gathering* a people to himself.³⁶ In this sense they held a very strong conception that Scripture works via a central dynamic of promise and fulfillment, enabling a rich, canon-wide biblical theology that culminated in an "already-and-not-yet" framework for understanding the situation of the Christian and the church today; Robinson actually says as much in noting that "promise and fulfillment remained [for him] the essential structure of biblical revelation."³⁷ Indeed, Robinson can make the summary claim at the end of his career that "I judge my own chief contribution to have been to relate the biblical concept of *ekklesia* to the biblical history of salvation as seen in God's promise to Abraham and its fulfillment in Christ."³⁸

I move on, then, to the question of appeal: How did Knox and Robinson appeal to Scripture during the course of theological argumentation, and what role did they desire that specific passages play in authorizing their proposals? There is a caricature of Knox and Robinson, based on the emphasis they placed on the particular locations where the term *ecclesia* shows up and the particular ways it is and isn't used, that ultimately their use of Scripture degenerated into mere proof-texting. Michael Jensen argues effectively that such a view of Knox and Robinson's employment of Scripture is mistaken, missing the mark in thinking

there was any danger of . . . [them] espousing a use of Scripture which took statements or verses out of their biblical contexts. . . . [Rather they believed that] the Old Testament must be read by Christians as pointing to Jesus. . . . The Bible is not a collection of disconnected proof-texts, but is unified by the history that it narrates—the history of Israel, in the first instance, which remarkably becomes the history of

³⁶ Kuhn, "Ecclesiology of Robinson & Knox," 79.

³⁷ Robinson, *Selected Works*, 1:263.

³⁸ Robinson, *Selected Works*, 1:267.

the whole of mankind. . . . The Bible unfolds its story as a “progressive revelation.”³⁹

Yes, they most frequently appeal to Matthew 18:20 and to the majority of the uses of *ecclesia* in the New Testament to demonstrate the priority of the local assembly in the biblical mindset. But their most compelling appeals to Scripture in support of their position actually come from Hebrews (especially 2:12 and 12:23), along with Colossians 1:18 and Ephesians 1:22–23 and 2:6–7. It is here we find an entire redemptive-historical framework emerge from their exposition of these texts and the dynamic role that the *ecclesia* term plays within them. Robinson, for instance, can say that these texts unveil “the ultimate purpose of God through a transcendent *ekklesia* . . . ‘the fullness of him who fulfills all in all.’”⁴⁰ Robinson says of Hebrews and Ephesians both that their “views of the *ekklesia* [seem] to me to have their basis in the creation of Adam, and *ekklesia* [seems] to be a term to express the fulfillment of God’s creative purpose in Christ. . . . ‘Adam at last.’ The church, then, in the Ephesians sense, is a reality related to creation, redemption, and the restoration of all things.”⁴¹ This, surely, is much more than mere proof-texting. Indeed, to many New Testament scholars it is compelling exegesis. Constantine Campbell, for one, argues that Robinson, as a top-notch New Testament scholar, demonstrates that there is biblical warrant for his claims about the priority and relationship of the local and heavenly assemblies that have been frequently overlooked by New Testament scholars. For instance, he believes Robinson’s work on Colossians 1 and Ephesians 2 affirms the reality of a heavenly gathering and demonstrates that the New Testament is more concerned about the earthly/heavenly dynamic of the church than the visible/invisible one (which has particularly dominated ecclesiological reflection, especially in the Reformed tradition).⁴²

But it is also important to inquire where Knox and Robinson’s use of Scripture may be found to be improper or less compelling. Jensen wonders with some merit whether “the method they employed

³⁹ Michael P. Jensen, *Sydney Anglicanism: An Apology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 33, 37.

⁴⁰ Robinson, *Selected Works*, 1:263.

⁴¹ Robinson, *Selected Works*, 1:269.

⁴² Personal conversation with Constantine Campbell, fall 2016.

. . . is sufficiently *theological*? It is certainly a linguistic analysis of the usage of a particular word in the New Testament texts. Is this sufficient to provide for a proper *theological* description of the concept of ‘church’?⁴³ We’ve seen above that their approach is richly theological, but only in relation to certain texts. And in fact further investigation of their corpuses reveals that other biblical passages are not treated with as much of an attempt to connect them to the larger redemptive-historical context and ultimately to a church-historical one. For instance, for all of the citations of Matthew 18:20 and the promise that Christ will be anywhere that two or three are gathered, I found no discussion of how the marks of a true church might inform such a reading, nor what the implications of this verse would be for a proper understanding of these marks. For instance, how does a true church’s concern that the sacraments be properly administered interplay with their claims that the New Testament only knows the *ecclesia* as a gathering (earthly and heavenly) and that Matthew 18 is indeed a primary example of such a gathering? Does this mean that the sacraments could be, or should be, administered amid any informal meeting of two or three believers? By whom and under what authority? How does this square with the assumptions of a passage such as 1 Corinthians 11:17–34, where a larger pattern of apostolic authority and ecclesial oversight is connected to sacramental practice? Further questions follow suit, exposing that in certain arenas their use of Scripture is indeed not theological enough.

Another important criticism that needs to be engaged in our assessment of Knox’s and Robinson’s proposals is Kevin Giles’s accusation that their work is open to the well-known criticism of James Barr regarding the semantic fallacy of “illegitimate totality transfer.” Giles believes that Barr’s work has definitively demonstrated that “it [is] not possible to build theology on the basis of biblical word studies . . . [because] the word study approach builds on the premise that key biblical terms have a fixed technical meaning . . . [which] is simply not true. . . . The word study approach to theology confuses words and concepts.”⁴⁴ At first glance it appears that their heavy freighting of *ecclesia* and its use in the New Testament is vulnerable to Barr’s critique. For instance, Campbell concedes that Knox and Robinson

⁴³ Jensen, *Sydney Anglicanism*, 85.

⁴⁴ Kevin Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church? An Exploration in New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 5.

grounded too much of their proposals in the word study method that Barr conclusively demonstrated to be problematic, believing they should have invested more energy in exploring the “body of Christ” image, which gets much more treatment and development in the New Testament as a dynamic concept.⁴⁵ But Jensen argues convincingly that this is an unfair characterization, noting that Robinson became aware of and agreed with Barr’s critique very early on.⁴⁶ Indeed, Robinson notes that he learned in his Greek studies “how to assess the actual semantic value of words as they were used by individual writers and in particular contexts, without simply importing a dictionary meaning into them with a heavy hand.”⁴⁷ His plan of attack in light of this danger and Barr’s critique as a whole was simple: “I began to find a Greek concordance of more use than a lexicon.”⁴⁸ If Knox and Robinson were guilty of illegitimate totality transfer when it came to interpreting the New Testament (and LXX) use of *ecclesia*, it wasn’t in a sloppy way; Robinson, at least, was too competent of a New Testament scholar for that.

The critique that really sticks comes from Graham Cole, who argues that while the Knox-Robinson proposals offer an important corrective to the “conceptual inflation” that so often occurs within the traditional Protestant notion of the church, and while their proposals are “exegetically well-founded,” they ultimately suffer from “conceptual isolation.”⁴⁹ Cole’s solution is that more conceptual clarification is required, specifically by delineating how the concept of church is a subset of the more inclusive concept of the people of God, which in turn needs to be seen within the conceptual framework of God’s kingdom purposes. Cole notes, “Robinson and Knox recognize that the church is a meeting of *the people of God*, but neither develops this insight systematically.”⁵⁰ By moving out a conceptual level to “the people of God,” Cole is convinced that the two-dimensional Knox-Robinson ecclesiology faces fewer issues and is largely successful in providing a corrective to the traditional Protestant ecclesiology, which

⁴⁵ Personal conversation with Constantine Campbell, fall 2016.

⁴⁶ Jensen, *Sydney Anglicanism*, 78.

⁴⁷ Robinson, *Selected Works*, 1:261.

⁴⁸ Robinson, *Selected Works*, 1:261.

⁴⁹ Graham Cole, “The Doctrine of the Church: Towards Conceptual Clarification,” in *Church, Worship and the Local Congregation*, ed. B. G. Webb (Homebush West, New South Wales: Lancer, 1987), 3.

⁵⁰ Cole, “Doctrine of the Church,” 7.

is, problematically in Cole's view, committed to a threefold delineation of the church's nature.⁵¹

But the question remains: Is there sufficient biblical warrant for their two-dimensional proposals such that they indeed succeed over the more traditional, three-dimensional Protestant view? To answer this question we need to turn briefly to Acts 9:31 (NRSV) where we read, "Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers." This verse inevitably exposes the "Achilles' heel" of the Knox-Robinson ecclesiology, for it seems on a plain reading to speak about a church (*ecclesia*) on earth that transcends any sort of local gathering, namely the church of believers who are united in Christ across the various regions of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. Indeed, when we remember that these regions represented the extent of Christian witness at the time, it follows that this text may even give us permission to speak of the earthly church in a global sense, because the extent of Christian mission has now gone to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Both Knox and Robinson were aware of the problem that this text posed for their position, and Robinson, while acknowledging that this verse does seem to have a regional rather than local scope, went on to claim that "as the context beginning in 8:1 reveals, this is still the Jerusalem church, attenuated or dispersed through persecution," drawing a final conclusion in keeping with his developed position: "the conception of a church which extends territorially while remaining the same church, however it may appeal to our modern frame of mind, has no further development in the NT."⁵² It seems clear that while Robinson is a great help in fending off what Vanhoozer has labeled a burgeoning "ecclesial-institutional complex,"⁵³ it appears that what Campbell has termed the "formerly-known-as-the-Jerusalem-gathering thesis" does not seem to take adequate account of Acts 9:31 and the ecclesial reality to which it points: some sort of communion of believers that transcends local gatherings but remains an earthly reality and is termed "the church" (*ecclesia*).⁵⁴ 1 Corinthians 10:32 (which speaks of giving

⁵¹ Robinson actually conceded Cole's point and welcomed his reappraisal of the doctrine of the church as leading to "greater Christian self-understanding today." Robinson, *Selected Works*, 1:270.

⁵² Robinson, *Selected Works*, 1:216–17.

⁵³ Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 197.

⁵⁴ Personal conversation with Constantine Campbell, fall 2016.

“no offense . . . to the church of God” in the same manner as one would speak of giving no offense to Jews or Greeks) and 12:28 (which speaks of God appointing “in the church first apostles” in a way that appears to transcend any particular local church), while compatible with multiple interpretations, also seem to be verses that further open the door for the reality that Knox and Robinson sought to deny: an earthly translocal church is assumed and authorized in Scripture, and thus a three-dimensional model of the church is superior to a two-dimensional one.

Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that while providing an important corrective to the inflation of the earthly translocal dimension of the church (a fact that should not be overlooked), Knox and Robinson are not ultimately persuasive in their claim that the New Testament knows and speaks *only* of the earthly (local) and heavenly (translocal) gatherings. Scripture does authorize us to be able to speak of an earthly translocal dimension of the church, namely the church as an earthly translocal aggregate. But the Knox-Robinson proposals provide an ecclesiological framework that is grounded in biblical theology and adamant about a close reading of the text, one that should be utilized for further, fruitful, theological reflection on the nature of the church. It seems to me that the “canon sense” exhibited by Knox and Robinson needs to be complemented by a “catholic sensibility”; that is, we need proposals that take the textual work of Knox and Robinson and put it in substantial conversation with theological, and specifically ecclesiological, traditions that have emerged in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church of Christ.

The exchange between Knox-Robinson and Cole ultimately points us back to the fact that, while a three-dimensional account of the church is to be preferred, it still requires greater conceptual clarity, as Cole so insightfully recognized. I propose that the further clarity we need might come *exegetically* by developing a schematic of the relationship between the terms *ecclesia*, *koinonia*, and *laos* in the New Testament, specifically a schematic where these three terms are coordinated with the three dimensions of the church discussed above. The end result of this coordination might very well identify a correspondence between each ecclesial descriptor and a particular ecclesiological dimension, most likely with *ecclesia* corresponding

primarily to the earthly local dimension of the church (which Knox and Robinson were so keen to point out), *koinonia* corresponding primarily to the earthly translocal dimension of the church, and *laos* corresponding primarily to the heavenly translocal dimension of the church. I would also propose that more conceptual clarity might come *theologically* by making connections to the trinitarian images of the church provided in Scripture: we are the people of God (highlighting the heavenly translocal dimension), the body of Christ (highlighting the earthly translocal dimension), and the temple of the Holy Spirit (highlighting the earthly local dimension).

Additionally, it would be important to also put these three (exegetically and theologically clarified) dimensions of the church in dialogue with church tradition in a way that Knox and Robinson largely failed to do, especially regarding how the marks and attributes of the church might interface with these dimensions. One could envision tracing out the Protestant marks of the true church (faithful proclamation of the gospel from Scripture, proper administration of the sacraments, appropriate discipline of believers under ecclesial authority) in connection with the earthly local dimension, the incipient creedal notes of the church (the confession by faith of “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church” that has not yet been fully realized) in connection with the earthly translocal dimension, and the perfection of those same creedal notes in connection with the heavenly translocal dimension (where faith is no longer required, for the notes are fully, perfectly, and eternally realized). This would then provide a way for us to better integrate the Protestant marks and the creedal notes with this three-fold delineation of the church’s nature, while simultaneously offering an explanation for how the church is *already* one, holy, catholic, and apostolic (by sight in heaven) and *not yet* one, holy, catholic, and apostolic (by faith on earth and thus requiring marks that designate where this church can be found).

Lastly, the conversation around the Knox-Robinson ecclesiology points to a greater appreciation of what Vanhoozer has termed “Pentecostal plurality,” for we see that different ecclesiological traditions have tended to emphasize and develop certain of these ecclesial dimensions to the neglect of others.⁵⁵ So, for instance, a case can be made that the Reformed tradition has most emphasized the heavenly translocal dimension, the Roman Catholic tradition has most

⁵⁵ Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 223.

emphasized the earthly translocal dimension, and the Free Church tradition has most emphasized the earthly local dimension. What then do these various ecclesiological traditions need to do in order to be more faithful to the full New Testament witness regarding the nature of the church? They need to contribute their distinctive insights and emphases while hearing the distinct insights and emphases of the other traditions, for, as Vanhoozer helpfully notes, “it takes many languages (i.e., interpretive traditions) to minister the meaning of God’s Word and the fullness of Christ. As the body is made up of many members, so many interpretations may be needed to do justice to the body of the biblical texts.”⁵⁶ Or, in this case, we might say that many ecclesiological traditions are needed to do full justice to the body of Christ. A comprehensive picture of how the three ecclesial dimensions emerge from the text of Scripture, interrelate, and mutually inform a full-orbed account of the church’s nature will only emerge as the various ecclesiological traditions listen to the particular insights that each has been gifted with. For now, it is my judgment that Knox and Robinson have contributed immensely to the needed conceptual clarification through a proper (though not ultimately compelling) use of Scripture in their theological proposals. The church is indeed a gathering that is earthly-local in nature and reflects the heavenly translocal assembly; it is just more than that. But given the way that the earthly local dimension of the church is so often neglected, especially in traditions such as Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism, it seems that the Knox-Robinson ecclesiology corrects an important blind spot and demonstrates a versatility of the Anglican tradition (at least of the Sydney Anglican variety) which may well enable it to play a mediating role of sorts between the various ecclesiological traditions. In short, the work of Knox and Robinson is to be critically commended as contributing toward greater Pentecostal plurality in our ecclesiology. This is, indeed, no small feat.

⁵⁶ Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 223.