

# The 'Locus' of the Church – Heaven or Earth?

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Some time ago, I was asked to review Kevin Giles' new book, *What on Earth is the Church? A Biblical and Theological Inquiry*.<sup>1</sup> Evangelicals in recent times have not written substantial works on the doctrine of the church and so I welcomed the opportunity to reflect on this fresh approach to the topic. Kevin and I were contemporaries at Moore College in Sydney. At a later stage he went on to do postgraduate study under C K Barrett at Durham. He now teaches in Melbourne and continues to write with a particular interest in New Testament studies. This book provides six chapters of biblical teaching and four chapters of theological reflection in the light of contemporary debates. Giles attacks a range of inadequate views, but is particularly opposed to a narrowly congregational doctrine of the church. In so doing, he challenges the teaching of Australian scholars such as Broughton Knox, Donald Robinson, Robert Banks and Peter O'Brien, though he points out that such teaching has its parallels in other places as well.

At times I found this work both stimulating and helpful. Although the central thesis needs to be challenged in various ways, the book makes a useful contribution to the debate about the nature and function of 'the church', making it worthy of a full-scale review article. I can only apologize to the author and to the editor of this journal that it has taken me so long to make a considered response.

## The Issue of Terminology

Giles first argues that a proper biblical theology cannot be based on an examination of the use of the Greek term *ekklēsia*, which has several different applications in the New Testament. He notes the difficulties involved in doing word-studies generally, and suggests that people appealing to the biblical use of *ekklēsia* usually posit one fixed meaning for the word, drawn from their prior conviction about its meaning. This is a serious warning, requiring us to reassess in each context the possible application of the term. It also suggests the need to examine the use of related terms and the teaching of Scripture more broadly concerning the

1 London: SPCK 1995 310 pp £17.50 pb ISBN 0-281-04842- 8

character and purpose of the people of God. In this connection, however, it was disappointing to discover that Giles offers no overview of Old Testament teaching, and does not even provide a summary of prophetic hopes about the people of God in the End time. His book is largely a study of relevant New Testament passages, with some attention to Old Testament and intertestamental perspectives as background for the interpretation of key texts. In short, it is not a holistic biblical theology of this important theme.<sup>2</sup>

In an excursus on ‘the meaning of the word *ekklēsia*: Old Testament and Intertestamental Background’, we are confronted with two opposing positions. First, there are those who claim that in the Septuagint (LXX), *ekklēsia* translates the Hebrew word *qāhāl*, which, along with the closely related term ‘*ēdāh*’, designates Israel as *the covenant people of God*. Those who take this line argue that the early Christians adopted *ekklēsia* because it allowed them to assert that they were the true Israel. Second, there are those who claim that the word was taken over by the early Christians because it had *no theological content*. Neither in classical Greek nor in the LXX does *ekklēsia* mean anything other than ‘assembly’. Like the Greek, the Hebrew *qāhāl* does not allude to a society or ongoing entity but to people actually gathered at one time. When the Old Testament writers wish to speak of Israel as the covenant community they use the word ‘*ēdāh*’, which is translated in the LXX by *synagōgē* (congregation).

Giles offers a helpful critique of both positions. While it cannot be claimed that *ekklēsia* in the LXX simply means Israel as the people of God, to argue that it never carries more than the classical meaning of ‘assembly’ is equally mistaken. There is a definite overlap in the way *qāhāl* and ‘*ēdāh*’ are used in various parts of the Hebrew Bible and the same can be said for the terms that are used to translate them in the Greek Bible.<sup>3</sup> Although *ekklēsia* was not a technical term for Greek-speaking first-century Jews – but was always understood to mean Israel as the people of God – this meaning was known. It was a word with ‘theological potential’. Giles suggests that the early Christians chose *ekklēsia* rather

2 Cf E P Clowney ‘The Biblical Theology of the Church’ in D A Carson ed *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study* (Exeter: Paternoster Press; Grand Rapids: Baker 1987) pp 13-87, for a more holistic approach to the biblical material at this point. Nevertheless, Clowney’s approach is more ‘systematic’ than ‘biblical-theological’, in the sense that he does not lay out the evidence in canonical or salvation-historical order. On the method of biblical theology as a discipline, cf C H H Scobie ‘The Challenge of Biblical Theology’ *Tyndale Bulletin* 42.1 (1991) pp 31-61 and ‘The Structure of Biblical Theology’ *Tyndale Bulletin* 42.2 (1991) pp 163-94.

3 Giles *Church* p 237, notes several examples where the words are used in parallel. For a detailed survey of the use of the Hebrew terminology and for comments about the overlap in meaning, cf W A VanGemeren ed *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* Vol 3 (Carlisle: Paternoster Press 1997) pp 326-8, 888-92.

than *synagōgē* as a self-designation (though cf Jas 2:2), because they wished to differentiate themselves from Judaism, not because there was a profound difference in the meaning of these terms.

## The Church Concept

Before he approaches the interpretation of the New Testament, Giles surveys and critiques various understandings of 'the church idea' or 'the church concept' that have emerged in recent decades. His aim is to find 'one concept that will allow for the integration of other key ecclesiological terms and metaphors'. This seems to preclude the possibility of a genuinely inductive treatment of the New Testament evidence. If his search were for a *working hypothesis*, to be tested by exegesis, I would be happier with the methodology at this point. But his approach certainly allows for the examination of much in the New Testament that would not immediately be classified as relevant to the formation of a doctrine of the church, especially if one were working with a classical word-study approach.

Giles argues that the notion of the church as 'the Christian community' is the most fruitful because all other titles and descriptions of the church can be subsumed under this heading. Rightly understood, the term 'community' reflects the more theologically developed Christian meaning of the word *ekklēsia*/church. The Bible unfolds God's commitment to gather together a people who are united to him and to each other. Within this biblical theological context, it is right to examine quite broadly the communal thinking of Jesus and the apostolic writers, and to avoid a more narrow focus on particular images of the church in Scripture. However, it is a moot point whether another term such as 'the Christian community' should be allowed to displace the word 'church' from the centre of our attention, as a means of explaining what the Bible actually means by 'church'!

Giles' stated concern in all this is to attack the *individualism* which he sees in the position of conservative Evangelicals and theologically liberal Christians. Modern Western culture has influenced their interpretation of the New Testament, making them insensitive to the wider communal aspects of biblical teaching about the church. In the foreword to this book, R T France similarly observes that, 'Evangelical Christians, with their robust concern for personal salvation, have been particularly prone to lose sight of the corporate dimension of New Testament Christianity, and so have often been slow to play an effective part in the life of the wider church'.

There is undoubtedly some truth in this, and Giles offers a sobering challenge to reassess whether a narrow congregationalism is consistent with Scripture. However, there are sociological and theological issues relating to the development of contemporary denominations which Giles only begins to address in his ninth chapter. A critical question is to decide the relationship between denomination and 'church'. To have doubts about the degree of one's involvement in certain church activities is not necessarily to lose the communal dimension to Christianity.

Evangelicals have their wider associations and affiliations, but these do not always coincide with the agenda and activities of the historic denominations. Some evangelical associations are ecumenical and cross the boundaries of denominational fellowship in helpful ways. Evangelicals in a given denomination may also be passionate to reform it but find their presence and their contribution unwelcome. The issue is not as simple as Giles and France imply. We all need to be involved in wider expressions of the church than our local congregations to be faithful to Scripture. But the critical question for us at the end of the twentieth century is the degree to which the historic denominations, their theological self-evaluation and their structures of association, allow us to express the sort of community in Christ that the New Testament envisages.

## Jesus and the Church

It is sometimes argued that Jesus' teaching about an immanent end precluded the possibility that he might have founded an ongoing institution called 'the church'. Giles deals succinctly with the question of Jesus' eschatological teaching and agrees with Jeremias that, 'precisely because Jesus believed that the end is near, it had to be his purpose to gather God's people of the time of salvation'.<sup>4</sup> A helpful distinction is made between the church *theologically defined*, which Jesus brought into being as he called his disciples and established them as the nucleus of the New Covenant people of God, and the church *sociologically defined*, as it emerged and changed at different times and in different places over the centuries.<sup>5</sup>

The authenticity of Matthew 16:18 is argued on several grounds, in particular the consistency with Jesus' teaching seen elsewhere in the Gospels. As in Mark 14:58, the background for interpretation appears to be Messianic hopes about the rebuilding of the temple, conceived of metaphorically as a new community. However, a critical question remains

4 J Jeremias *New Testament Theology* Vol 1 (London: SCM 1971) p 170

5 In sociological terms, the process of 'institutionalization' began 'from the moment Jesus called the first disciples and they came to see themselves as a distinct group, with a specific mission' (Giles *Church* p 44).

as to the locus of this community and the way it is to be governed. Although there are some indications of a minimal pattern of communal rule set forth in the Gospels, Giles argues against the traditional Catholic view that Jesus appointed Peter as the first head of the church, and the apostles as the first pastors who were to ordain subsequent leaders.

As documents addressed to particular communities, the Gospels present the disciples as a paradigm of individual and corporate Christian existence. So, for example, Mark's community may be described as an 'apocalyptic sect': 'a small group of Christians seeing themselves as God's family and true Israel, anticipating the end in the near future, firm in the belief that divine truths not known to others had been revealed to them, and active in evangelism.'<sup>6</sup> John also presents the disciples as the true Israel, as 'the true eschatological people of God gathered by their covenant Lord, Jesus'.<sup>7</sup> In the Johannine community there appears to have been a minimal development of institutionalization. But the picture of church life that emerges from Matthew's gospel suggests to Giles that institutionalization had progressed many steps from the incipient forms left by Jesus:

The one church founded by Christ is now meeting in individual churches that have as their counterpart synagogue communities; disputes about doctrine and discipline have agreed procedures to resolve them; certain people are recognized as leaders; and what takes place when congregations meet is seen as the worship of Jesus.<sup>8</sup>

However, it is at this point that I begin to have difficulties with Giles' approach.

While it is true that Matthew progressively reveals the legitimacy and importance of worshipping Jesus, it cannot be concluded from Matthew 18:15-20 that this was the focus of the gathering envisaged by the evangelist.<sup>9</sup> When disciples gather in Christ's name, to resolve a problem in their relationships or to pray together, Jesus promises to be present, enabling them to know the will of heaven and to seek for that will to be done. Jesus is not the object of worship here, but the means by which the

6 Giles *Church* p 49, following H Kee *Community of the New Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster 1977) pp 144-77

7 Giles *Church* p 71, citing J W Pryor *John: the Evangelist of the Covenant People* (Downers Grove: IVP 1992) p 157

8 Giles *Church* p 63

9 Cf D G Peterson *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Leicester: Apollos 1992) pp 81-93. The gathering envisaged in Matthew 18:17-19 appears to be for the express purpose of resolving a dispute in the life of the community. It is true, however, that v 20 speaks more generally about the risen Christ being present at any gathering in his name.

new community is united and maintained in the Father's will. The passage certainly envisages the ongoing presence of the risen Christ with his 'church' and that teaching must also be allowed to have its impact on our understanding of the foundational passage in Matthew 16:18-19.

Giles rightly observes that 'the community of disciples finds its identity as far as Matthew is concerned in relation to Jesus and in distinction from the historic Israel'.<sup>10</sup> Jesus 'builds' his church as people like Peter are enabled to identify and confess 'the Messiah, the Son of the living God'. But Giles gives the impression that this church is merely an earthly entity – an extension or renewed version of Israel – and fails to draw out the full significance of the contrast implied by Jesus' reference to '*my church*'. God first gathered the community of Israel to himself at Mount Sinai (Exod 19:46), giving that 'church' his word and promising to go with them, to enable them to fulfil their calling (cf Acts 7:38). Jesus in his earthly ministry gathered a group of disciples to himself as the nucleus of the new or renewed people of God and called them 'my church'. As the resurrected and ascended Lord, he commanded them to make disciples of all nations, bringing converts, as it were, to his heavenly throne and promising to be with them 'to the end of the age' (Matt 28:18-20). So the final perspective of Matthew's gospel is that the locus and focus of Christ's church is *in heaven*, where he now reigns as Messiah and Lord. Of course, this heavenly entity has its earthly manifestations (as in Matt 18:15-20), but the power of death will not prevail against it (16:18) and the true church will ultimately be manifested in the resurrection of the dead.

To put it another way, the church in Matthew's gospel is an *eschatological entity*, not simply to be identified with 'the kingdom of God' but also not simply to be identified with earthly organizations and their structures. There is a 'now' and a 'not yet' aspect to the church. Giles rightly emphasizes the Messianic status and character of Jesus' 'church' but fails to see the implications of Jesus' final call to gather disciples to himself as the ascended and enthroned Messiah.

## The Spirit and the Church

Turning to the Book of Acts, Giles notes that the gift of the promised Holy Spirit issues in *a new community*. In the Gospels, the divine presence was known in the company of Jesus, but in Acts by the gift of the Spirit, whom Luke can call 'the Spirit of Jesus' (16:7). Despite the differences, there is a continuity between the pre-Pentecost and post-Pentecost community, leading Giles to speak of 'the birthday of the post-Easter church' rather

<sup>10</sup> Giles *Church* p 56

than more simply of 'the birthday of the church'.<sup>11</sup>

Luke uses the word 'church' quite extensively between Acts 5:11 and 20:28, but also has a fondness for collective titles such as 'those who believe', 'the brothers' or 'the disciples', to describe Christians. These titles help to fill out what is meant by 'church', making it appear that *ekklēsia* has more than the classical sense of 'assembly, gathering'. Luke's use of this term is diverse and complex, requiring more detailed study than Giles allows. Taking the point that the collective titles give us a wider picture of Luke's communal understanding, it is still important to ask why he employs *ekklēsia* as he does.

The term *ekklēsia* is certainly used in the classical sense of 'assembly, gathering' in a secular context (Acts 19:32, 39, 41), but it does not follow that Luke or the early Christians were limited in their application of the term to actual gatherings of believers. The usage of Acts, in parallel with the various collective titles for Christians identified by Giles, suggests a more developed application of *ekklēsia*. My conclusion is that the theological reference is primarily to 'those whom the Lord Jesus has gathered to himself', rather than to 'those who gather in his name'. However, it flows from this that the act of gathering gives expression to what it means to be the community of Christ, hence the attention given in Acts to articulating the nature of Christian gatherings and their purpose.

Giles argues that *ekklēsia* in Acts mostly designates the Christian community as it was found in particular places such as Jerusalem and Antioch. The reference to the Israelites at Mount Sinai as 'the church in the wilderness' (7:38) suggests that the Christian community in its entirety is being presented in Acts as 'restored Israel, called into being by the new Moses, Jesus'.<sup>12</sup> The usage in 9:31 is regarded as the one instance in the New Testament where the word is used of Christians spread over a larger area than one city, who continue to be thought of as 'the church' in the singular. In 20:28 Paul is said to be employing the term with reference to a universal reality without geographical limitations. This is possible, though the stunning alternative is quickly dismissed by Giles. The context could just as easily imply that the community of Christians in Ephesus, which the elders are to care for, is precious to God because *it* was purchased with

11 Giles *Church* pp 89-92, gives a good survey of the debate that has taken place amongst scholars regarding the relationship between Israel and 'the church' in Luke-Acts. Giles concludes that the Lucan writings bear witness to a point in history where the Christians are coming to see themselves as a distinct new entity, having their roots in Israel, but now independent of Israel.

12 Giles *Church* p 85. For the importance of Acts 7:38 in Luke's formulation of a doctrine of the church, cf D Seccombe 'The New People of God' in I H Marshall and D Peterson edd *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1998) pp 349-72.

the blood of his Son. Of course, the implication of this reading would be that other congregations could similarly view themselves as having been brought into existence by the redemptive death of Christ.

Once again, however, Giles is content to view the church – whether local or ‘universal’ – as an earthly community, with no heavenly locus or focus. He even argues that Luke’s ‘absentee Christology’ and emphasis on the Spirit’s work in forming and maintaining the earthly community supports his case. But this is an artificial distinction between Christ and the Spirit. The challenge of the sermons in Acts is to recognize and respond to the exalted Lord Jesus with repentance and faith, expressing that reorientation of life by calling upon his name in baptism and turning to him as saviour. Those who receive the Holy Spirit from the ascended Christ in this way are bound into a new union with him as the heavenly Lord of the church and with one another as fellow believers (cf 2:33-42).

Different patterns of oversight and pastoral care are seen to be emerging in the churches described by Luke, though the charismatic dimension of leadership is still very much alive. Giles concludes that ‘Luke is describing a church where institutionalization has progressed further than in the early Paulines, but is not as advanced as it is in the Pastorals’.<sup>13</sup>

## Pauline Perspectives

A progressive development in Paul’s ecclesiology, in conjunction with a suggested development in the social structuring of the church, is proposed by Giles. Following Margaret MacDonald, the early Paulines are said to reflect ‘community-building institutionalization’, the middle Paulines ‘community-stabilizing institutionalization’, and the late Paulines ‘community-protecting institutionalization’.<sup>14</sup> I am not convinced, however, that such a progression can be easily established.

In the earliest letters, the eschatological and the communal are inextricably intertwined. Becoming a Christian involves transfer from the community identified with Adam to the community identified with Christ (eg Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:20-29). Paul also uses a number of Greek prepositions to stress the close identification between Christ and his followers. For example, baptism into Christ signifies entry into the eschatological community of those who belong to Christ, not simply a personal union with the Saviour. Closely allied with these fundamental communal categories are the motifs of the body of Christ and the new temple.

<sup>13</sup> Giles *Church* p 97

<sup>14</sup> Cf M MacDonald *The Pauline Churches: A Socio-historical Study of Institutionalization in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Writings* (Cambridge: CUP 1988)



In speaking of Christians collectively as the body of Christ, Paul affirms that they are 'one with Christ and one with each other by divine agency, and the church on earth is an expression of Christ's presence in the world'.<sup>15</sup> Giles does not consider whether this image is applied to the local church though he does note that building and temple motifs are so used in 1 Corinthians 3:9, 16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:16. As the apostle struggles with the reality of Israel's continuing existence in unbelief, he bestows on Christians collectively the lofty titles used in Scripture for Israel. In 1 Corinthians 1:2, for example, the notion of being sanctified and 'called to be saints' is linked with being 'the church of God that is in Corinth'. Thus, the Christians in Corinth are identified as the (true) people of God.

Given this background study of the apostle's communal teaching, Giles argues that it is impossible to conceive that Paul thought that local groups of believers were the primary corporate expression of the Christian faith. But this is not a valid conclusion from his argument so far. Given that there are images and perspectives on the Christian community that go beyond the local church, Giles has not grappled sufficiently with the fact that Paul applies this powerful terminology to Christians in a local setting. Why does he do this? What is the significance of this pattern of argument in the Pauline letters? The apostle does not address the Corinthians as 'a church of God' but as 'the church of God which is at Corinth', implying that each congregation represents the whole entity called 'church'.

Paul speaks of persecuting 'the church of God' (1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13; cf 'the church', Phil 3:6), meaning Jewish Christians. Although he sometimes uses the plural to refer to 'the churches of Judea' (Gal 1:22; 1 Thess 2:14), he can think of the earliest believers collectively as 'the church'. This is interesting because it is hardly likely that with their increasing numbers they could have continued to meet as an actual assembly in Jerusalem.<sup>16</sup> But when the apostle addresses the Christians in Corinth as 'the church of God' (1 Cor 1:2), even though we have evidence for a number of house-groups in that city, we know that they could gather together as 'the whole church' (1 Cor 14:23). It is not sufficient, therefore, to say with Giles that *ekklēsia* can simply refer to 'all the Christians in one location'. If the word retains its sense of 'gathering' or 'assembly' elsewhere in the epistle (eg

15 Giles *Church* p 104. He rightly avoids an over-literal identification of the church with 'Christ in the world' but insists that 'the body of Christ' is no mere metaphor.

16 P T O'Brien *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* NIGCT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1991) p 378. O'Brien argues that the usage in Phil 3:6 does not contradict his preceding argument that *ekklēsia* has the primary sense of 'a gathering' or 'an assembly' since 'the expression probably signifies a reference to the church in Jerusalem before it was distributed into a number of smaller assemblies into various parts of Judea'. But Giles rightly points to the evidence of Acts where the number of believers was in the thousands at the time of Paul's persecuting work. So many people could not have gathered in the one place.

11:18; 14:19, 28; 16:19), we are bound to consider how that applies to 1 Corinthians 1:2.

Once it became impossible for Christians in a given place to meet together as a single congregation, they retained their identity as ‘the church’ in that city, even though they were now meeting in a variety of ‘churches’. God had gathered them to himself in that foundational assembly and allowed them through growth to multiply and diversify the expressions of ‘church’ in that region. Given the New Testament focus on God’s activity in building the church, it is easy to see how the notion of being ‘the church of God’ could have expanded as the work itself expanded.

There are verses in 1 Corinthians where ‘church’ could be applied to Christians in general, beyond the Corinthian gatherings (eg 10:32; 12:28). How are the diverse Pauline usages of the term to be held together and explained theologically? The Roman Catholic view, of one universal Church over which the Pope presides, made up of local or national churches presided over by bishops, is rightly critiqued by Giles. There is clearly an Anglican version of this ecclesiology that must be similarly critiqued. Giles also attacks the Protestant view that local churches are manifestations of the one, ultimate and eternal church, which is ‘in heaven’.<sup>17</sup>

It is true that some of the more ‘universal’ references to church in Paul’s writings cannot simply be to an entirely other-worldly reality – ‘the church of God to which offence must not be given (1 Cor 10:32); the church in which God has appointed apostles, prophets and teachers (1 Cor 12:28), and the church that Paul persecuted (1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13; Phil 3:6)’.<sup>18</sup> But Giles too quickly severs Paul’s doctrine of the church from his teaching about the heavenly citizenship of Christians, which is enjoyed here and now by faith (Phil 3:20-1; cf Gal 4:21-31; Eph 2:6). This is strange for someone who has been insisting that ecclesiology can be discerned in passages where the word ‘church’ is not actually mentioned!

My own view is that the proponents of a heavenly or eschatological locus for the church have overstated their case and have not taken adequate

17 Cf, for example, D W B Robinson *The Church of God* (Sydney: Jordan 1965) and ‘Church’ in J D Douglas ed *The New Bible Dictionary* (London: IVP 1962); D B Knox *Thirty-Nine Articles* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1967) pp 36-52; R Banks *Paul’s Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in their Historical Setting* (Exeter: Paternoster Press 1979); P T O’Brien ‘The Church as a Heavenly and Eschatological Entity’ in D A Carson ed *The Church in the Bible and the World* (Exeter: Paternoster Press 1987) pp 88-119

18 Giles *Church* p 120

account of those references which imply an extended community of Christians on earth, beyond the reality of the local congregation. Furthermore, it is not the human activity of gathering that is essential to the Pauline doctrine of the church but the prior act of God in gathering us to himself in Christ. However, to put aside any sense of gathering or assembly from Paul's general use of *ekklēsia* is as much a mistake as to overplay that sense. The position that Giles attacks *can* lead to a congregationalism that is inconsistent with New Testament teaching. But his own view of church as 'one community, expressed in more than one way' is too earth-bound and does not give an adequately eschatological perspective. Furthermore, ecclesiology must be rooted in Christology and Christ is in heaven (cf Col 3:1-4).

Giles is particularly critical of Peter O'Brien's interpretation of Colossians 1:18 and 1:24. O'Brien argues that, since the context in 1:15-20 is 'moving on a heavenly plane' the church in view in 1:18 and 1:24 is 'not an earthly phenomenon' but a 'supernatural and heavenly one'.<sup>19</sup> Apart from the linguistic challenges which I have touched on previously, Giles insists that it is inconsistent to say that a heavenly church could suffer (1:24) or grow (2:19). But it is a misreading of O'Brien to conclude that the heavenly church has no earthly life or existence apart from the gathering of Christians in local congregations. Christians participate in the 'heavenly community' that Christ is gathering to himself as they go about their ordinary tasks, including ministry to unbelievers, and they suffer as a consequence. To put it figuratively, their feet are on the ground but their faces are turned to heaven, because their life is 'hidden with Christ in God' (3:3). It is also worth considering the difference Paul intends by his use of the body metaphor, as distinct from his use of *ekklēsia* in Colossians 1:18, 24.

The idea of being gathered around Christ in the heavenly realms (cf Eph 2:5-6), which parallels the notion of a heavenly church, is another way of saying that believers enjoy continuous fellowship with the ascended Lord. This anticipates the perfect fellowship of the new Jerusalem, which is the new creation of biblical prophecy, a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21-2). This fellowship with Christ is pre-eminently expressed when believers gather together 'in church'. Giles has much to say about the church as the eschatological people of God, but only in Ephesians does he highlight the earthly-heavenly dimension to Paul's eschatology. Even here he fails to acknowledge the heavenly dimension to Paul's ecclesiology.

19 P T O'Brien *Word Biblical Commentary 44 Colossians, Philemon* (Waco: Word 1982) p 60. To describe this view as 'Platonic', as Giles does several times, is to misunderstand the way Paul expresses his eschatology in terms of the present experience of ultimate or heavenly realities.

Opposing a 'heavenly' view of the church in Ephesians, Giles quotes Schnackenburg: 'in spite of her "presence" in heaven (cf 2.5f) which is bestowed upon her in Christ, her head, she still remains his instrument on earth'.<sup>20</sup> This does not seem to me to deny the possibility of a heavenly locus for the church, though it does leave open the question of how the 'universal' church finds expression on earth. Giles believes that the concentration in Ephesians on the church as 'the totality of the Christian community on earth' eclipses the congregational aspect of the church. But it is hard to believe that the picture in 4:1-16 is not localized and congregational because of the intimacy of relationships envisaged.

## The Church in the Non-Pauline Documents

Space permits comment only on the teaching of Hebrews. Giles notes the importance of Hebrews 12:18-24, with its contrast between Israel 'drawn near' or 'come to' the earthly Mount Sinai and Christians 'drawn near' to the heavenly Jerusalem, identified as Mount Zion. Here we are told we have the common Jewish apocalyptic idea that what lies in the future already exists above. In this present time, 'Christians can think of themselves through faith as already one with all those gathered around the throne of God in heaven as they will be on the last day. In other words, this passage speaks of end-time existence as present possibility for the believer'.<sup>21</sup> So Giles is prepared to recognize that the vision in Hebrews 12:22-4 has reference to 'the ultimate, completed company of the people of God, membership of which is now enjoyed by faith'.<sup>22</sup> It is to this gathering in heaven that believers on earth have 'drawn near'. Yet he denies that this can be a key for interpreting the 'universal' uses of the word *ekklesia* in the Pauline epistles.

At one level I can agree with his reserve here. Hebrews' view of things is not necessarily the same as Paul's. Nevertheless, from a canonical perspective, the interpreter is bound to ask how the theology of Hebrews and Paul relate together. This question is especially necessary for evangelical commentators to ask, because we believe that the same Spirit inspired both writers. Furthermore, if Hebrews articulates in Christian terms the common Jewish apocalyptic idea that 'what lies in the future

20 R Schnackenburg *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1991) p 305

21 Giles *Church* p 156. His criticism of my interpretation of *proserchesthai* ('to draw near, approach') is ill-considered (cf D G Peterson *Engaging with God* pp 238-41). The contrast in the passage is with Israel gathered at Mount Sinai to hear the word of the Lord and to receive the blessings of the covenant relationship initiated by God. For Christians this happens definitively when we come to faith in Christ (note the perfect tense in the Greek of 12:22) but needs ongoing expression in prayer and praise (note the present tense in the Greek of 4:16; 10:22).

22 Giles *Church* p 156, citing my own words in *Engaging with God* p 282

already exists above', and that we can participate in this now by faith, is it not reasonable to look for some expression of this idea in Paul?

My argument is that what is most explicit in Hebrews 12:22-4 is implied or expressed differently by Paul at a number of points. Moreover, from a systematic theological point of view, the heavenly locus of the church as a supra-congregational reality makes a great deal of sense. It preserves the christological and eschatological focus of Paul's thinking and helps us relate together the apparently disparate evidence of the New Testament on 'church' in line with these other central doctrines. In practical terms, one must ask what else could be the locus of Paul's 'universal' use of the *ekklēsia* concept. In contemporary terms, are we left with Rome or Geneva or Canterbury?

## Theological Conclusions

As Giles seeks to draw the threads together, he insists that the apostolic vision of the church as one world-wide community, challenges all essentially congregational definitions of the church. My problem with this conclusion is that Giles has not sufficiently grappled with the extraordinary application of 'church' categories and perspectives to local assemblies in the New Testament. The key hermeneutical question in this debate is the way teaching about the local church is to be related to teaching about the universal or, as I would describe it, 'heavenly' church.

Giles argues that the word 'church' is used in Scripture to describe Christians in a given area, even though they did not necessarily meet together. This expands the way we may view 'the local church'. The possibility of a wider association of congregations being viewed as 'church' is also envisaged. But how far can we go in the adaptation of terminology before the fundamental biblical sense is lost? Despite his arguments to the contrary, Giles has let go of the congregational or assembly aspect of this terminology, replacing it with 'community' as the fundamental notion. This then raises questions about the way genuine community is to be expressed across geographical and cultural barriers, or where there is heresy or distortion of biblical teaching.

Giles is absolutely right to conclude that the church is not defined by its ministerial structures but by its 'communal existence given by God in Christ, and by the presence of the Spirit who provides the leaders needed'.<sup>23</sup> This puts paid to the commonly held view that bishops or other clergy are a centre or focus for unity. It is Christ the exalted Lord of the

church and the apostolic word inspired by the Spirit of Christ that is the focus for unity. Leaders are given to point others away from themselves to Christ, to teach the apostolic word and to encourage believers to obey it.

Giles provides a helpful survey of the way in which the visible-invisible distinction has been made throughout the centuries, as theologians have sought to formulate an adequate doctrine of the church. He is particularly taken with modern Roman Catholic attempts to overcome 'the visibilist and juridical conception of the church of the Counter-Reformation, in the rediscovery of the church's supernatural and mystical element'.<sup>24</sup> It is strange that he notes the eschatological dimension to this new line of thinking without developing that significantly in his own approach to the New Testament evidence.

One of the most interesting chapters in Giles' book is his discussion of the Christian denomination as 'church'. He seeks to give a 'provisional' theological basis for seeing the denomination as an expression of Christian community. In so doing, he views the denomination as an entity that is 'neither equated with the church of God, nor seen as but a pragmatic federation of churches, a fully human construct, with no theological validation'.<sup>25</sup> This is a complicated issue that I would like to explore more fully at another time. It involves making historical and sociological observations about the development of different types of denominations. It also involves an analysis of the various theological models that have been put forward for considering how the one community of Christ can exist in such a diversity of associations.

Giles concludes that there are three expressions of Christian community which we experience in dynamic interplay: the congregation, the denomination and the church as all believers. In short, it is his theology of church as community that enables him to give this status to denominations. He concludes his work with an analysis of various appeals to the Trinity as the model on which ecclesiology should be formulated. Here again he has provided an excellent resource for those who want to think through the issues being raised by the wider discussion of the doctrine of the church. But here too I want to enter into a deeper engagement with some of the issues he has raised.

## Conclusions

1. It is not adequate to say that *ekklēsia* in the New Testament always

<sup>24</sup> Giles *Church* p 193, citing B Forte *The Church: Icon of the Trinity* (Boston: St Paul 1991) p 16.

<sup>25</sup> Giles *Church* p 198

means 'assembly' or 'gathering'. The word is used in an extended way on some occasions to describe the community of Christians in a given area, who may never have had the opportunity to meet together. It may even be used of Christians in general.

2. However, in his desire to avoid a narrowly congregational view of the church, Giles effectively ignores the etymology of the word when he interprets it in wider contexts. If a writer like Paul can use it to refer to a local gathering and then use it in the same letter more generally, has he radically altered the meaning of the word?

3. It is certainly inadequate to formulate a doctrine of the church using merely a word-study approach and focusing on *ekklēsia* to the detriment of other terminology. Apart from the use of well-known metaphors for the New Testament people of God, such as 'body' and 'temple', there are passages that deal with the life and character of 'the church' without using any of the familiar terms.

4. However, Giles' attempt to use 'community' as the one concept that will allow for the integration of other ecclesiological terms and metaphors actually obscures the meaning and central importance of *ekklēsia* in the New Testament. He ends up with an entity that is a renewed version of Israel, with an essentially earthly locus, albeit different from historic Israel in its focus, character and structures.

5. Most seriously, I believe, Giles has played down or denied the heavenly locus of the church as it emerges from certain key passages in the New Testament. This is a failure to highlight the way the ascended and enthroned Christ is at the centre of the church, gathering people to himself on the basis of his redemptive work to form a community whose citizenship is in heaven. It is a failure to see how the inaugurated eschatology of the New Testament should be applied to the church concept to deliver us from the earth-bound and organizational focus of much contemporary ecclesiology.

6. It is important to provide an adequate theology for 'church' in its wider manifestations. But we must not lose sight of the significance of the local congregation in the plan and purpose of God, as it is set before us in Scripture.

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