

On Knox's Analysis of the Church

1. A basic problem with Knox's whole analysis of the church in *The Early Church and the Coming Great Church* is that he fails to recognize—clearly and consistently—the important distinction between the "visible" church, on the one hand, and the "institutional" church(es), on the other. (Revealing in this connection is his use of the phrase, "'visible' institutional church" on 87.) Part of the reason for this failure, I suspect, is that he has nothing that adequately corresponds to my concept-term "witness," together with my distinction between "witness" (referring to the singular variable) and "witnesses" (referring to the plural values of the variable). By analogy, "the visible church" may be said to refer to the singular variable, "the institutional churches," to the plural values of the variable, in which ~~it~~ the visible church is "sometimes more, sometimes less, visible."

2. In fact, Knox is not all that satisfying in what he says (or implies) about the other important distinction between the "visible" and the "invisible" church. His tendency, indeed, is either simply to ignore the church in the second respect or to reverse the relative order of importance between it and the church in the first respect. Thus typical of his view is a statement like the following: "The church[, being essentially a historical community,] is not a new thing, or something newly created whenever the Word is preached and the sacraments administered (though this is true, too, in a sense), but is a great social body continuously existing through the centuries" (137). Compare the comparably typical statement of Bultmann, where the reverse order of importance is asserted: "The church only exists where the faithful are assembled around this word [*sc.* of proclamation that preaches the cross as God's judging and liberating act and asks everyone whether he is willing to submit to the cross and understand himself in terms of it]. Therefore, the church is neither a religious association nor a sociological phenomenon, but rather is in its essence invisible, namely, as the community of those among whom God creates life—and rules. And this is true, even if the church is also the visible community of the faithful, recognizable through word and sacraments" (*Existence and Faith*: 201; cf., also, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*: 42: "The preachers, the apostles, are human beings who can be understood historically in

their humanity. The church is a historical, sociological phenomenon, whose history can be understood historically as a part of the history of culture. And yet they are all eschatological phenomena, eschatological occurrence. . . . They are all phenomena that are subject to historical, sociological, and psychological examination, and yet for faith they are all eschatological phenomena.").

3. The closest Knox comes to making an adequate distinction between "visible" and "invisible" church is in a statement such as this: "If . . . we mean by 'church' the many actual groups in various lands organized and conducting their affairs in various ways, then the church is certainly not *one* and has never been; but if, when we speak of the church, we are speaking of the particular kind of shared experience that at least to some degree is characteristic of these various groups—if by 'church' we mean the distinctive common life—then the church is one, indivisible, and everywhere the same. Since it is this shared experience, this community, which really constitutes the church, the church is eschatologically (or, if one prefers, ideally) all but identifiable with the community, and we can make such statements as, 'Let the church be the church'; that is, 'Let the church fully realize and express the community which makes it the church'" (51). Even this statement, however, is inadequate when compared with that typical of some of the Anglican theologians of the seventeenth century, who distinguish, not between "church" and "community," but between two communities, in the sense of two kinds of "communicating," or sharing. There is the kind characteristic of the called who communicate or share in "the profession of supernatural verities revealed in Christ, use of holy Sacraments, order of Ministry, and due obedience yielded thereunto," which communication is "discernible"; and there is the kind characteristic of the elect or chosen, who alone communicate in "those most precious effects, and happy benefits of saving grace," which communication is "not discernible," but "invisible" (*Anglicanism*: 44).

16 December 2007