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Research Notes

A Response to Jeffrey Kloha's Study of the Trans-Congregational Church¹

Jeffrey Kloha maintains that the New Testament uses “church” (ἐκκλησία) to refer to three identifiable entities—first, individual congregations; second, several local congregations conceived of corporately, that is, as a “trans-congregational church”; and third, the church universal (*una sancta*). It is Kloha’s contention that far too many in our circles—and in modern, American Christianity in general—conceive of “church” at primarily the local level, and virtually not at all at the trans-congregational or universal levels. Hence, he spends most of the article demonstrating that the writers of Acts and the Pauline epistles placed great stock in geographically and ethnically distinct congregations cooperating together not only in externals (feeding the hungry, the Jerusalem collection, etc.), but much more in shared communication, shared doctrine and practice, and shared mission and confession. When there was division within the congregations regarding the necessity of circumcision for the Gentiles—as happened, for example, during events leading up to the Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15)—the two groups met together to submit their respective understandings of the Scriptures to one another under the overall direction of the apostles. But not everyone’s voice was heard at this conference and, somewhat oddly to us, no Gentiles were ever brought in to plead their case. Nevertheless,

consensus was reached under the guidance of the Spirit and the study of Scripture, as well as the example of the Spirit’s obvious work through Peter, Paul, and Barnabas. Once the issue was settled, all sides agreed to submit to the shared understanding of God’s will. This passage relates a major event in the narrative of Acts, one with significance beyond what is discussed here. But for our purposes, it does show that the congregations functioned in real and significant ways as a larger “church” (176).

Kloha makes the point again and again—with plenty of scriptural evidence—that individual clusters of congregations (which he calls the “trans-congregational” church²) shared concrete forms of fellowship with one another, cooperated in externals, strove for doctrinal unity also in controverted

¹ The following paper, a response to Jeffrey Kloha’s article, “The Trans-Congregational Church in the New Testament” (*Concordia Journal* 34.3 [July 2008] 172–90), was delivered on March 6, 2009, before a joint meeting of the departments of Exegetical Theology of Concordia Seminary (St. Louis) and Concordia Theological Seminary (Fort Wayne) which occurred at the Theology Professors Convocation (March 5–8, 2009, Raleigh, NC).

² Suitable alternative terms may be “trans-parochial” or “trans-local” (187 n. 1). “The term ‘trans-congregational’ will be used in this essay to refer to the manifestations of church larger than the local congregation but not the *una sancta*” (187 n. 1).

points, and even remonstrated with errant congregations who, supposing themselves “autonomous,” were challenged by the *consensus omnium* “to return to the shared practices of the broader church” (182, on Corinth). He also dares to assert that terms like “district” and “synod”—admittedly foreign to the NT—nevertheless refer closely enough to ecclesiastical structures beyond the local congregation that all but resemble the trans-congregational nature of the church identified: “In this context, ‘trans-congregational church’ refers to any structural entity beyond the local congregation, be it circuit, district, synod, even international church organizations” (186).

At this point I should come clean and admit my own enthusiastic endorsement of Kloha’s article. In an e-mail I wrote to Kloha last August, I commended the author for having produced “a wonderful piece,” “timely” for the issues faced in Missouri, and exemplary also for its superior manner of “wrestling deeply with ancient social issues.”³ I will provide here some additional points that I believe support Kloha’s already well-substantiated article.

First, Kloha overlooks a detail in Acts that very much supports his idea that clusters of congregations—despite diversity as to geographical location, ethnicity, and giftedness—nevertheless exhibited a marvelous unanimity of purpose and doctrinal consensus that had been instilled in them through the Holy Spirit. Following the Jerusalem Council, Acts records that Paul and Silas—having just commenced the second journey (since Acts 15:39)—“strengthened” the churches (15:42; 16:5), delivering the decisions “reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey [παρεδίδωσαν αὐτοῖς φυλάσσειν τὰ δόγματα τὰ κεκριμένα ὑπὸ τῶν ἀποστόλων καὶ πρεσβυτέρων τῶν ἐν Ἱεροσολύμοις]” (16:4 NIV). The NIV’s “obey” may seem a too stringent equivalent for φυλάσσειν,⁴ though the basic sense seems clear enough: Paul and Silas were “handing over” (παρεδίδωσαν) directives reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the common Christians—if not to “obey” (see note 4), then at least to “hold on to” (i.e., “treasure,” “esteem highly”).⁵ Clearly the common Christians were not at liberty to treat “the directives” (τὰ δόγματα) as though these were indifferent or inconsequential matters;⁶ for at the

³ John G. Nordling to Jeff Kloha, 1 August 2008, 12:03 PM.

⁴ Cf. *tradebant eis custodire dogmata* (Vulg); “überantworteten sie ihnen zu halten den Spruch” (Heilig. Schrift); “they delivered them the decrees for to keep” (KJV); “they delivered to them the decrees to keep” (NKJV); “they delivered to them for observance” (RSV; NRSV); “they delivered the decisions... for the people to obey” (TNIV); “they delivered the decisions . . . for the people to keep” (GWN). Emphases are mine.

⁵ For this understanding of φυλάσσειν cf. BDAG 5a: “to continue to keep a law or commandment from being broken—a) act. *observe, follow*” (original emphasis). Other passages which support this meaning are (in order of citation) Matt 19:20; Luke 18:21; 1 Tim 5:21; Acts 7:53; 21:24; Gal 6:13; Rom 2:26; Luke 11:28; John 12:47; and Acts 16:4.

⁶ There must be a formal correspondence between “the directives” (τὰ δόγματα) and the third-person sing. aor. indic. act. vb. ἔδοξεν (“it seemed best”) which occurs four

convention the apostles and elders actually had the cheek to say *in conclave*: "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us [ἐδοξεν . . . τῷ πνεύματι τῷ ἁγίῳ καὶ ἡμῖν] not to burden you" with thus and so (15:28). Thus Acts 16:4 presents Paul and Silas as delivery men, "handing over" to the congregations—not physically present in Jerusalem—those matters which had been determined for them through in-depth study of the Scriptures which especially James (of all people!) had undertaken (15:16-18, 19-21). It goes without saying, of course, that many contemporaries would have been opposed to James's exegesis in such matters, to say nothing of Luke's reportage of the same; but it seems safe to assume that such resisters were not to be considered part of the church, neither in its local, trans-congregational, nor universal manifestations.⁷ At any rate, it was expected that all of the congregations to which Paul and Silas travelled during the second journey would accept without reservation the Jerusalem decree without rehashing the important work that had been done there. Summarizing this episode of Acts, Haenchen explains:

With the story of Timothy [cf. Acts 16:1ff] and the report of the delivery of the δόγματα of the Apostles and elders, it is evident that the mission now beginning [= second journey] is undertaken in complete concord with the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem. Luke thus sees the Pauline mission, which from now on becomes his real theme, as harmoniously integrated into the total work of the church.⁸

Second, I was reminded, while reading Kloha's article for the first time, of an assertion I made quite innocently in *Philemon* with respect to archaeological remains of buildings such as the early Christians may have inhabited in the Euphrates Valley (Dura-Europas) and Corinth (Anaploga villa).⁹ Such evidence, I surmised, suggests that while each congregation was vastly different as to size, domestic layout, and physical surroundings, it was nevertheless the case that each was to be vitally aware of and preserve the

times in Acts 15, three of which (15:22, 25, 28) describe formal pronouncements made by the apostles, elders, and entire gathering at the Jerusalem Council. So F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951) 308; Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 479.

⁷ They may, perhaps, have reverted to the Judaism out of which early Christianity sprang (cf. J. Louis Martyn's discussion of "Christian Jews/Jewish Christians" in *Galatians* [Anchor Bible 33A; New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday, 1997] 38, 118 n. 96, 239, 588).

⁸ Haenchen, *Acts*, 482.

⁹ For Dura-Europas, see Floyd V. Filson, "The Significance of the Early House Churches" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58 (1939) 107-08; Bradley Blue, "Acts and the House Church," in David W. J. Gill and Conrad Gempf, (eds.), *The Book of Acts in its Graeco-Roman Setting* (vol. 2 in the series *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 166-67; Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *The Letter to Philemon*, Eerdmans Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 261. For the Anaploga villa, see James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Harper Atlas of the Bible* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 174-175.

“oneness” (ἡ ἐνότης) it shared with all other congregations in the Spirit, hope, lordship of Christ, doctrine (in the objective sense of the μία πίστις, Eph 4:5), Baptism, and God.¹⁰ I opined that each of the congregations unto whom Paul wrote—including, of course, Philemon’s house congregation (“and to the church-throughout-your-house [καὶ τῇ κατ’ οἶκόν σου ἐκκλησίᾳ], Philemon 2b)—was supposed to be “an intentional Eucharistic fellowship” that met regularly to hear the Word and partake of the Lord’s Supper in league with all of the other congregations to which Paul wrote.¹¹

But that was before reading Kloha’s “Trans-Congregational Church in the New Testament”; I now suspect that the “oneness” (ἡ ἐνότης) so highly prized by the first Christians was not so much that enacted between individual members within local congregations as relations between the congregations themselves and congregational representatives of the same who would have operated in wider spheres of influence than prevailed at local levels. In such a scheme there must have been considerable scope given to pastors whose reach, even for us, typically extends beyond the one, two, or several congregations served. Debate swirls about what office the so-called “elders” (πρεσβύτεροι) held in Acts,¹² though Kloha finds it “not impossible” that the πρεσβύτεροι—at the Jerusalem conference, at least—were “the leaders of the individual ‘house churches’ which were under the overall direction of the ‘apostles’” (176). Not that Acts and the Pauline epistles were ever nonchalant about lay participation at local levels; much more was it the case, however, that ancient persons in general, and perhaps the first Christians in particular, thought *collectively* of themselves and of the groups of which they were a part.¹³ Then, too,

¹⁰ John G. Nordling, *Philemon*, Concordia Commentary Series (St. Louis: Concordia, 2004), 175. Paul exhorts Christians to make every effort “to keep the oneness of the Spirit [τὴν ἐνότητα τοῦ πνεύματος] in the bond of peace; [there is] one body and one Spirit [ἐν σώμα καὶ ἐν πνεύμα], just as you were called in the one hope of your calling—one Lord [εἷς κύριος], one faith [μία πίστις], one Baptism [ἐν βάπτισμα], one God [εἷς θεός] and Father of all” (Eph 4:3-6; my translation).

¹¹ Nordling, *Philemon*, 175. The following passages were “merely illustrative” (Nordling, *Philemon*, 175 n. 163) of the congregational fellowship presumed: 1 Cor 1:9; 10:16-17; 12:27; Eph 3:6; 4:4; Phil 2:1-4. Also Acts 2:42; 1 John 1:3, 6, 7.

¹² Was the usage in Acts derived from Judaism or from that of the Gentile congregations? Kloha opines (“Trans-Congregational,” 189 n. 14) that there probably was overlap between the two; in the Hellenistic congregations the duties of πρεσβύτεροι included “exhortation and preaching in the church services” (BDAG, s.v. πρεσβύτεροι 2ba, on the basis of 2 Clement 17:3, 5). For πρεσβύτεροι in general cf. Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; 1 Tim 5:17, 19; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Pet 5:1, 5.

¹³ “Anthropologically oriented social psychologists call the opposite pole of individualism collectivism. First-century persons like Timothy and Paul and Jesus were collectivistic personalities. A collectivistic personality is one who needs other persons to know who he or she is. Every person is embedded in another, in a chain of embeddedness [*sic*], in which the test of interrelatedness is crucial to self-understanding. A person’s focus is not on himself or herself, but on the demands and expectations of others, who can grant or withhold acceptance and reputation. In other words,

Christianity was itself conceived of originally and broadcast to the world intentionally as a religion by and for the slaves—who possessed no personhood whatsoever. I have not the space here to elaborate,¹⁴ but suffice it to say that the work conducted at local levels would have consisted mainly in helping all the gathered to see—both great and small, both named Christian and anonymous person at lower societal level—that Jesus, the supreme Kyrios, had died a slave’s death upon a cross, had risen triumphantly from the dead, and as a result of this salvific event there was now possible a new destiny “in Christ” for such as died to past sins baptismally and rose from the font in faith to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord in the Supper—actions conceived of more corporately than individualistically.¹⁵ Also urged on the indeterminate multitudes was “the cross” that God gives: “let him take up his cross and follow me,” Jesus urges identically in both Matthew (16:24) and Mark (8:34), and Luke adds “daily” (καθ’ ἡμέραν) to the saying (Luke 9:23). This “cross” is all but code for what we Lutherans call vocation: “The disciple of Jesus is a cross-bearer, and [this] he remains . . . his whole life.”¹⁶

The activities documented in the preceding paragraph continue to take place in the church at local levels; Kloha has put many on notice, however, that “church” should also be conceived of trans-congregationally—that is, across the barriers erected by geography, giftedness, gender, ethnicity, social class and, I might add, historical location. Most of Kloha’s insights fly in the face of the rampant autonomy and pragmatism that has made inroads into so many American congregations, including our own. Yet for that very reason, I submit, Kloha’s article should be studied carefully by many and his conclusions heeded. He demonstrates, for example, that ἡ ἐκκλησία does not always have the same meaning lexically in the NT (173–174). Sometimes, to be sure, the word means local congregation, as in the expression “church-throughout-the-house” (Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phlm 2), and entry 3βα in BDAG supports this localized meaning of the word “church” on the basis of the following citations (in order of appearance): Matt 18:17; 1 Cor 11:18; 14:4–5, 12, 19, 28, 35; 14:34 (plural); 3 John 6; Acts 15:22. But in a distinct entry (3c), the editors of BDAG provide the meaning “the global community of

individuals do not act independently,” Bruce J. Malina, *Timothy. Paul’s Closest Associate* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008) 3–4. Cf. my review of this book in *Logia* 18.1 (Epiphany 2009): 56–57.

¹⁴ See John G. Nordling, “A More Positive View of Slavery: Establishing Servile Identity in the Christian Assemblies,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 19.1 (2009): 63–84.

¹⁵ Nordling, “Positive View of Slavery,” 78–80.

¹⁶ J. Schneider, *TDNT* 7:578. For my own thinking on the manifold ways biblical slavery anticipates Luther’s doctrine of Christian vocation cf. Nordling, *Philemon*, 137–139; Nordling, “Slavery and Vocation” *Lutheran Forum* 42.2 (Summer 2008): 12–17; Nordling, “A More Positive View of Slavery,” 81.

Christians, (*universal*) church" – what most call *una sancta*.¹⁷ Finally, however, there is a wide middle group which the editors of BDAG define as "the totality of Christians living and meeting in a particular locality or larger geographical area, but not necessarily limited to one meeting place" (BDAG 3bβ). This entry is supported by far more citations than the other two put together¹⁸ and, while Kloha cites several of these in the course of his article, he can not do justice to them all.¹⁹ These latter citations impress on one the realization that the first Christians attached the highest significance to outwardly diverse bodies of Christians who were inwardly united by the Spirit as to doctrine, practice, worship, hymnody, and a host of other markers that too many today dismiss as "adiaphora." The NT evidence everywhere suggests, however, that also in the so-called "indifferent matters" – which often are not so indifferent as many presume – there was in the Spirit a genuine meeting of hearts and minds, and the sense that "no congregation was an island unto itself" (181). Kloha's goal, with which I agree, is that our pastors and people turn once again to the NT to sharpen our sometimes quite dim understandings of "church" and then apply this scriptural understanding to whatever outward structures our synod may take. Let Kloha have the final word: "The goal is that the church so structured and blessed by the power of the Spirit might all the more clearly confess Jesus Christ as Lord, so that every tongue might make that same confession here in this life and again finally at their resurrection on the Last Day" (187).

¹⁷ Supported by the following passages (in order of appearance): Matt 16:18; Acts 9:31; 1 Cor 6:4; 12:28; Eph 1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:23–25, 27, 29, 32; Col 1:18, 24; Phil 3:6.

¹⁸ **Acts 5:11; 8:3; 9:31; 11:26; 12:5; 13:1; 14:23; 15:3; 18:22; 20:17** (cf 12:1; 1 Cor 4:17; Phil 4:15; 1 Tim 5:16); James 5:14; 3 John 9-10; Acts 8:1; 11:22; **Rom 16:1; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; Col 4:16; Rev 3:14; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1; Rev 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7.** Plural: Acts 15:41; 16:5; Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 7:17; 2 Cor 8:18-19, 23-24; 11:8, 28; 12:13; Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 23, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 22:16. Of Christian communities in Judea (Gal 1:22; 1 Thess 2:14); Galatia (Gal 1:2; 1 Cor 16:1); Asia (**1 Cor 16:19**; Rev 1:4, 11, 20); Macedonia (2 Cor 8:1).

¹⁹ Kloha cites the bold font passages in n. 18.