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Excerpts from *The Biblical Doctrine of the Church*

WILLIAM ROBINSON

William Robinson (1888-1963) was the leading figure in the British Churches of Christ during his ministry as principal of Overdale College in Birmingham, England. He was first and foremost a churchman, but he commanded the respect of the scholarly community associated with the University of Birmingham and the Federation of Selly Oak Colleges. The following are two excerpts from Chapter V of his book *The Biblical Doctrine of the Church*. Hopefully they will inspire the reader to consider the entire book.

It is no mere figure of speech when Paul names the church the “body of Christ”—it is a mystical reality. The church is that concrete reality by which Christ becomes manifest to the world, and by which he acts in history. It is the “dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” Wherever the church of Christ is, at that point the eternal penetrates (shoots down into) the temporal. We have also seen that Paul went even further in the language which he dared to use. More than once he suggests that “the Christ” is not simply the historic Jesus, nor even the glorified Christ, but the glorified Christ plus the church. It is this daring identification of the Christ and the church which underlies his discourses on Christian marriage in Ephesians: the church is the bride of the Christ, and we are members of his body—“of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones,” according to one corrupt text (Eph 5.30, A.V.). We have seen that it underlies, too, his amazing statement in Colossians: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh complete what remains Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (1.24). How can anyone say such things without blasphemy, unless he speaks from an experience of *fellowship* so real and so close that it involves that interpenetration of personality which is the hidden secret of reality? We have also seen that this was understood by Paul in his earlier Corinthian correspondence, where we have explicitly the boldest of all his assertions about the Christ (1 Cor 12.12). There he definitely calls the church the Christ: “For just as the body [the physical body] is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.” Here, following his argument, we should expect to find, “so it is with the church”; and, indeed, that is what he means, as the subsequent argument shows. His substitution of “the Christ” for “the church” is not accidental. It is intentional—Christ and the church are, in some sense, identified. (Page 99)

The church differs, therefore, from every other society in the world. All other institutions, as compared with her, are of human contriving and are mortal. They have their beginnings, though those beginnings may be lost in obscurity; and they come to a definite end. This is true even of such institutions as empires, nations, and civilizations. But the church is not of human contriving—it is divine. It has ontological reality. Neither is it mortal—it is immortal: “On this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.” “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” The church represents that point in the creative and redemptive activity of God where he is revealed; and as such is a continuation of that process of his showing forth of himself which was begun when the Word “was in the world, . . . yet the world knew him not.” The church is a supernatural society within a natural environment—“a colony of heaven,” as Paul called it. (Page 102)