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The Authority of Synods

COLIN BUCHANAN

Synods are in the news a bit at the moment. As I begin this article there is a 'Synod of Bishops' meeting in Rome. More to the point, I am later this same day to discover whether or not I have been re-elected to the General Synod of the Church of England. So synods are on my mental agenda, even if not on everybody else's. And the question arises: 'What authority do they have?' Or, 'What authority should they have?'

The question looks as though it could expect a quantifiable answer: synods have 'this-much' authority—but not 'that-much'. But this is specious—none of the authority held by the ecclesiastical 'authorities' can be quantified in quite that way. Rather it is diffuse, it overlaps with that of other 'authorities', and it cannot in any case pretend to be other than a mediation of the authority of God over human life. Synods, whatever their shape or form, are bound to have some of this inexactness in their 'authority'.

It looks as though the earliest such 'meetings' (for 'synod' means 'meeting') were councils of bishops—whether on a provincial basis, or an ecumenical basis as in the 'Great Councils'. The bishops met jointly to articulate the faith (especially where some Article had been controverted), to adjudicate in conflicts between dioceses or areas (or even theologians), and to enforce discipline (by anathemas if necessary) in conformity with these decisions. It was apparently taken for granted that bishops were sufficiently representative of their dioceses to be able to take such actions without reference to other clergy or to the laity. However, in some 'gut-level' way the bishops had to act in conformity to the *consensus fidelium*. Where they failed to do so, a clash would occur. And in the last resort the faithful might prevail. One of the points at which Newman steered closest to the wind in his Roman Catholic days was in his insistence on this role of the laity, wholly contrary to the temper of Pius IX or his English adherents. Newman's *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*¹ picks out the ways in which a role in relation to the powers of councils could still be played by the laity. The bishops *were* representatives. In council and in concert they had *almost* plenipotentiary power. But even so the power was not absolute, unconditional, and unqualified.

All that is true even from a Roman Catholic standpoint. The Church of England qualified the findings of the Great Councils even

further. The findings are only true because 'they may be proved by most certain warrants of holy Scripture' (Article VIII). Now another authority has been added to screen the first authority: the earlier General Council of the church has to submit to a later scrutiny, being judged correct (in this instance) not because it was a General Council, but because Cranmer and other authorities of his time agreed that it was scriptural! In such a case, the appeal to Scripture *either* includes a strong presumption of the clarity and perspicuity of Scripture *or* is a covert claim by another authority (? Cranmer) to appeal to Scripture more authoritatively than did the early councils. Cranmer would in fact have maintained the clarity of Scripture, but it is difficult (even whilst favouring the thrust of what he did) to maintain that all the requisite hermenutics sit open to instant apprehension, or that the average ploughman would have happened upon the doctrine of the Trinity as quickly as the Archbishop himself would have done. So again there is no hard-and-fast authority residing absolutely in either the General Councils which produced the creeds, or the hand of Archbishop Cranmer which drafted the Articles, or the civil and ecclesiastical bodies which required subscription to the Articles from 1571 onwards. The authority is shared and partial, and leaves undefined room for the actual perceptions of the teaching of Scripture which the ploughman may manifest.

Against this background, which teaches us not to look for too much, there are certain Christian principles which should be stated about synodical authority. If they are admitted, then much else follows.

1 The connexionalist principle

Methodism has always been known as a 'connexion', whilst Independents are by definition independent. But there is a tendency in discussing features of the Church of England, whether its episcopal ministry or its synodical structures, to ignore *its* connexionalism, and thus to discuss ecclesiological particulars without establishing the basic ecclesiology itself. Jim Packer and I exposed ourselves to this treatment in *Growing into Union*.² Because we were handling questions disputed on the Anglican and Anglican-Methodist scenes in England, we did not argue for the connexionalist basis to episcopacy, but rather assumed it. As a result we attracted fierce criticism of our statements on episcopacy from Independent evangelicals, when what they really opposed was our connexionalist ecclesiology, of which diocesan episcopacy was only a ministerial outworking. I would not want to make the same tactical error again.

Anglicanism then is essentially connexionalist. There is an interdependence of local congregations which makes appropriate an understanding of the church of a nation or area as having a common organic life, and as being amenable to single decisions about faith and prac-

tice. Episcopacy represents and reinforces the family-life concept of a multiplicity of congregations, but the connexionalism bridges a multiplicity of dioceses also, and makes the wider area the region within which autonomy under God is exercised. If the argument is taken to its logical extreme, then the whole world-wide church should form a single constitutional entity—a pattern which the Church of Rome in fact follows. But the upshot of *that* is that the organs of government become either unrepresentative or hopelessly unwieldy, and the unwieldy will always slide towards the unrepresentative.

It has become the wisdom of Anglicanism to produce 'national' churches. There are great strengths and great weaknesses about this concept, and in general they are not part of the discussion here. One clear strength from a synodical point of view is that it is *just* possible to sustain a consistent involvement in the life of the church at three 'levels' of synodical meeting, e.g. at parochial, diocesan, and national. It is likely that other levels (be they deanery, provincial, or world-wide) can only be sustained by letting go one of the three levels already accepted. Perhaps the truly robust churchman can manage four, and slip in deanery meetings. But the moment the 'higher levels' are being run by persons who have no live place in the local levels, then the system is in trouble. If connexionalism is to run through representatives, then the representatives must not be specially employed professionals, but must have genuine roots in the local churches.

None of these general principles predetermines how much authority shall be located in this synod or in that. In England a combination of tight geography and a unique (but evolving) church-state relationship has given specially strong powers to the General Synod. In other parts of the world a scattered geography has led to dioceses having more authority, whereas the General Synod has had reserve powers which lift it above a federal body but do not require the frequency of meetings which the Church of England's General Synod has. Thus in Australia, for instance, the General Synod meets only once every four years.

It is clear that the partial answer of 'national churches' does not exhaust the requirements of a true connexionalism. If the connexionalist case can be made from the Bible (and it can—but not here!), then it cannot stop short on national boundaries (which have no New Testament role to play). There must be world-wide organs of meeting and conferring. The doubt is whether *governmental powers* should be exercised from an ecclesiastical boardroom in Rome or Geneva or elsewhere. Technically speaking, once national churches are autonomous, then they can only have 'fraternal' relationships with other national churches; and they *can* pull apart from each other and reveal that their unity is not (in constitutional terms) organic. So the dilemma remains for connexionalists: should world-wide organs of government

govern a single world-wide body, or should connexionalism find its constitutional expression in several autonomous bodies? The former solution has enormous practical disadvantages, the latter is still in search of a theology. But the horns of the dilemma ought not to make anyone jump instead into Independency . . .

If we may, in an interim way, grant a connexionalism worked out (as in Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and many non-episcopal churches) on a national or regional basis, then it is clear that some organ of government of a supralocal sort is needed. The synod is beginning to rise above the constitutional horizon.

2 Government by representation

Can the body of Christ order its life under God by representative persons taking counsel, and perhaps action, on behalf of the rest? Only the most determined of Congregationalists would say 'no'. Every institution of any size—even a college staff meeting—has to have smaller 'steering' and standing committees, and these may at intervals have to take action on behalf of the bodies whom they serve. Are they then serving or governing? The issue lies behind the whole principle of government by representation. In one sense the representative body has naked power to act; in another, as successive civil governments of Britain have been finding recently, there can only be government by the consent and agreement of the people. In the last analysis, if they withhold their consent, the institution is 'ungovernable'.

It is clear that the bishops at the early councils reckoned that they could 'represent' their sees perfectly adequately in their own persons. On the whole their sees agreed with them. But, as we have seen, there was a real sense in which the *consensus fidelium* operated as the final authority if the bishops went astray. The pattern of 'bishops alone' has, however, remained in the Roman Catholic Church down to this present day. It is exemplified in the Vatican II General Council, and in that creation of Vatican II, the Synod of Bishops (in which some bishops are representing others, on the assumption that all the bishops together still represent the whole church, but that getting over 2,000 together at once is expensive financially, unhelpful pastorally, and unwieldy as a debating procedure). It is further seen in the provisions for applying the decisions of Vatican II: the bishops of the various territories are to carry them out. There is no expectation of there being any other body with any authority to reject Rome's requirements. There exists no synod in, say, England, to which decisions about liturgy (for instance) can be referred. In recent years we have seen priests' conferences arise to put pressure upon the episcopate, and in the last few months we have seen the birth of something new again: the pastoral council at Liverpool, in which lay

people made representations to the authorities.

These moves in the Church of Rome reflect the unwillingness of Christians who are told that all believers are equally the body of Christ to leave all authority with the episcopate. No doubt the 'bishops alone' theory arose in part from difficulties of travel and assembly in the days of persecution before the time of Constantine. No doubt it was continued for all sorts of reasons (but largely because no one questioned it) in years thereafter. (It was of course a kind of accident that brought Athanasius to Nicaea as a deacon—he did not 'represent' anything or anybody; he came as a sort of valet!) No doubt there have been occasions since when getting bishops together was the only practical form of representation (this was, for instance, the way in which a synod of the Anglican Province of the West Indies was first formed—simply a meeting of bishops). But the rediscovery of the lay person in the twentieth century as a true member (perhaps *the* true member!) of the body of Christ, and not a mere appendage, was bound to mean that a 'bishops alone', or even 'bishops and clergy alone', policy was bound to come under pressure.

If we narrow the front to England and the Church of England today, we find that there are no geographical or communications reasons why much fuller representation than 'bishops alone' should not exist. Furthermore, the clergy have had forms of representation (the ancient convocations) which were very powerful prior to the Reformation but subsequently continued in a much more tenuous way. In the most Erastian days of the Church of England, the convocations were in effect suspended, but the church revival of the nineteenth century (which wished to make much of the priesthood) led to the reviving also of the convocations. The coming of the railways, the penny post, the telephone, and the motor car, all made England into a very small country where assembling was easy, and the twentieth century saw the dawn of a desire for lay representation. The rationale for this has been much increased by the financial dependence of the clergy upon the giving of the active worshipping laity, a recent and previously unprecedented feature of Anglican church life. Granted therefore the 'national connexionalism' of the Church of England, it is also natural and right that the General Synod should include quantifiable representation by the 'three estates'—bishops, clergy, and laity. The unresolved question is whether the laity *can* be truly represented when General Synod meets during weekdays three times a year, and thus only certain categories of laity can in fact offer themselves for election.

3 The relation between representatives and represented

No form of representation would be appropriate without a true answerability to the church thus represented. This has the following

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features in its Church of England expression:

- a) The whole concept of election involves an answerability every time a new election comes round. The system of election used (see 4 below) ensures that sitting candidates can be challenged by new ones, and so they ought to be. After every five years the elected synodsmen ought to be made to account for what they have been doing.
- b) The actual working of General Synod requires that certain issues be sent down to dioceses, and gives scope for many others to be treated similarly. Thus some thousands of Christians may be involved in responding to particular issues (especially if dioceses in turn send questions to deaneries or parochial church councils). An instance of this was the matter of admitting young children to communion. In 1974 General Synod declared its support for this change, and referred the matter to the dioceses. The diocesan returns were too equivocal for the General Synod to feel it had a mandate to proceed, and thus the matter perished. Representation, if it is to be *Christian* representation, involves a sensitive awareness of when it is appropriate to act fast and decisively on behalf of the church (or even slowly and indecisively), and when it is appropriate to consult the church formally.

In addition to these formal features of representation, it is clear that informal communication between electors and elected is crucial. The major difficulty in this is the sheer inertia among the electors about reforms in the church and about the agenda of General Synod. But in principle the following further links can exist, and often do exist:

- a) The representatives on General Synod are *ex officio* on their diocesan synods, and are usually on the standing committees of the diocesan synods.
- b) They give oral reports to their diocesan synods, and the brief printed report of General Synod's activities is in the hands of diocesan synodsmen in order that they may ask questions.
- c) They make themselves available to deanery synods, and informal conferences on special subjects in their dioceses.
- d) Diocesan synods can pass their own resolutions for consideration by General Synod (and, to spell it out in full, diocesan synods may be themselves handling deanery resolutions, and deaneries handling ones from PCCs!).
- e) Representatives are open to approach by any electors at any time about any issue.
- f) One further means of communication which I have pursued is the sending of a personal letter each Christmas to all the electors (clergy in my case) in the diocese. This does not attempt to give a dispassionate account of what synod at large is doing: rather, it describes what I have been doing, and leaves the readers to infer from my silences the areas I have been culpably neglecting.

It is my conviction that if the General Synod is to have authority

it must exercise it in ways which give the whole people of God a certain place in the decisions taken. The above procedures are an attempt to find that 'certain place'. In constitutional terms they are an attempt to give expression to that appeal to the faithful which Newman was keen to emphasize.

4 Methods of election

It remains for me to make a theological remark about methods of electing. The Church of England has adopted (and over the years slowly strengthened) the use of proportional representation (PR) by the single transferable vote (STV). It is clear that in a church with the catholicity of Anglicanism (viz. the comprehensiveness!) it is important that representative bodies do truly represent the emphases, shades of colour, and heterogeneity of the persons represented. The representative synod ought to be a microcosm of the body of the church. This screams out for the use of proportional representation.

The STV is the method by which PR is obtained. This system means that, instead of voters registering merely a 'for' (by marking in an X) or 'against' (by not marking with an X) alongside each candidate, they *arrange* the whole list of candidates in their personal order of preference, and thus produce a much more accurate picture of their own reactions to the list. The rules then ensure that votes which are not needed by the candidates given first preference are 'transferred' to the second preferences shown on voting papers. It is not appropriate here to explain the rules in detail, but they do most accurately achieve the result. The usual constituency is, of course, a multi-seated one, for that is the only way that anything 'proportional' can be obtained in a result. But it must also be a locally based one, so that there is *some* true relationship between elector and representative. As representatives are being elected on a diocesan basis, both these requirements are met. There are important implications for both candidates and electors.

If we can imagine an Xs' election with three vacant seats, and with each elector having three votes, then the following problems arise for potential candidates:

- a) Any three candidates who have an agreed policy (e.g. representing vegetarian Christianity) and have the support of 51 per cent of the diocese can get 100 per cent of the representation, if the only other candidates represent carnivorous Christianity. But if *four* vegetarians wanted to stand, then there would be a chance that they would only get under 40 per cent of the vote each, and the carnivores with only three candidates and 49 per cent of the vote would get all three in. Thus someone must decide in advance (perhaps by caucus) *which* three vegetarians should stand.
- b) On the other hand, if the opposition to the vegetarians is split equally into two different camps (e.g. the carnivores and the fasters),

then the vegetarians only need a minority vote (somewhere above 33 per cent), to get all three in, and they could even afford to let a fourth run and to settle for the best three. But they dare not actually do this, because they cannot be sure that the opposition is equally split, and indeed cannot be sure until too late whether each of the opposition parties is running three candidates. The opposition, from its point of view, might be making common cause and trying to get common candidates in. For it is absurd that 34 per cent of the electorate should elect 100 per cent of the candidates.

c) Thus the Xs' system requires machinations and deals outside the election machinery in order to manipulate the electorate into certain results. This is highly distasteful and arguably unchristian. There is no chance of a true microcosm of the electing body coming out of an Xs' election: the result will favour the majority, which will be over-represented, unless minorities indulge in skullduggery. And if *all* are minorities (which is likely in any comprehensive situation), then all are driven to skullduggery or extinction.

Similarly the electors face great problems also. Suppose now that there are no 'party' groupings but merely a handful of persons of different views and gifts and experience standing as independents. Then the elector is faced with the following dilemma:

a) Shall he cast an X for each of three different candidates? If he does, then he fails to give any advantage to any of the three over against each other, and he may find that his third preference has defeated his first preference partly through the X which he himself gave him. There is no way that he can give a special weighting to the candidate he specially wants to see elected.

b) Alternatively, then, shall he cast only one vote—for the candidate whom he specially favours? But then what happens if that candidate is not otherwise well favoured? The voter has opted out of the election, when theoretically he had two more votes he could have cast. Indeed, the same applies if the favoured man gets in easily: he did not particularly need the one vote given him, and the voter could have easily used two other votes without damaging his favoured candidate's chances.

Every now and again the call goes up (it has happened recently in the church press) 'Why cannot I have a hand in the choice of all the successful candidates?'. And the answer is that, if so, others will then have a hand in the choice of none at all. And the fair thing is to give every elector one vote but allow it to be transferred when it is not needed.

The effect of this on 'parties' is dramatic. Any number of persons can run under the same flag, without hurting the chances of the particular grouping over all. It is unemotive to allow others to run: they cannot 'split' a vote which moves on and cumulates on the most favoured candidates. Thus no cloak-and-dagger primary selection by

caucus is needed, and in turn all things are naked and open. Thus both by the production of a true microcosm, and by the openness of the procedure, this system reflects a truly Christian way of operating. It deters attempts at skullduggery, whilst other systems encourage such efforts.

One could perhaps add that the church has here something to teach the world. English politics are ruinously confrontational: Labour versus Tory and, at the time of writing, Left versus Right within Labour. The politicians are wholly unconcerned about a *fair means*—they are only concerned about a *loaded result*. Let us use evil means, and let us fiddle those means to load them the more, in order to achieve the power we want: so their actions speak. And PR by STV is to be urged (as indeed it has been urged by the General Synod on the political parties) as providing a *fair means* which is almost incorruptible by power-seeking politicians. So the church's use of the system is part of its witness to the state and to the world of the necessity to honour God by our *means*, and leave the results to him.

5 Conclusion

Our theologizing about synods means that we look for the Word of God to be applied to a connexionalist church through a taking counsel together with prayer to God, and with soundings of those being represented. At times it is appropriate to ensure that divided opinions are not settled by sheer majority voting, but that the debate should continue. At other times it is important to test the mind of the three 'estates' separately. In the words of the Archbishop of York when the 1975 Synod was opened, 'Do not let us think we run the Church of England.' For the Church of England is 'run' not only by General Synod, but also by the semi-autonomous diocesan synods and parochial church councils, and by the wholly autonomous voluntary bodies and independent institutions such as missionary societies, Mothers' Union, youth organizations, theological colleges, publishing houses, etc. There is no single *locus* of authority within the church; all these different agencies in concert and in tension with each other are trying to discern the will of God by applying the Word of God and the wisdom of men of God to the inherited situation. The system may at times cater for the lower nature of man, and means which are not honouring to God may hold sway for a while. But that is true in independent congregations as much as in the synod of connexionalist denominations.

Meantime, the quest for world-wide fraternity continues. There may be no papal power in the Anglican Communion, but there is a sense of mutual duty and responsibility. It can come under pressure, as it has in the past in liturgical reform or intercommunion, or more recently with the ordination of women. But the fact that we do not put our trust in the Vatican concept does not mean that we can see better

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than partial or imperfect justification for the 'national connexionalism' which underlies our synodical structures. Like all things Anglican, it is a part dogmatic, part pragmatic, construct, and we inevitably enjoy a love-hate relationship with it. Perhaps God is yet there in the midst of it all.

I at least must take that view, for whilst the argument has been unfolding I have duly been returned to General Synod for another five-year stint.

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NOTES

- 1 John Henry Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, critical edition of text edited by John Coulson (Geoffrey Chapman, London 1961).
- 2 C. O. Buchanan, E. L. Mascall, J. I. Packer, Bishop of Willesden, *Growing into Union* (SPCK, London 1970) ch.4.