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'Government by Synod'— A Presbyterian Reaction to the Report

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THE Church of England has been and still is predominantly a national Church. Its continuing form was the outcome of largely political decisions in the sixteenth century and its subsequent history has been so closely interwoven with that of the State that even the events of the Prayer Book controversy of 1927/28 did little to alter the essential relationship. This particular pattern and history of Establishment have done very much to shape the Church's continuing character, with its blend of the national and the ecclesiastical, and to mould the attitude of its clergy and members to its continuing, largely unchanging, existence. Like the secular State, with which it has had such close associations, it has always known the existence of parties within its midst, but has succeeded in maintaining an essential unity. And again, as in the State, these parties, if often loosely defined and largely unorganised, have striven for control of the government at the centre.

'Government', however, is one of those words that mean different things to different people and denominations. It can mean, when applied to a Church, the exercise of central powers of decision in such matters as the making and revision of Church law, in the promulgation of definitions of doctrine, the ordering of liturgy, the definition of powers of discipline etc., which is much of what currently occupies Convocations and Church Assembly; or it can mean the spiritual oversight of the people of God in the life of their congregations and parishes, the exercise of power to ensure as far as possible that the Church is being truly the Church in its life 'at the grass roots'. These alternatives are not mutually exclusive, but there is no doubt that the emphasis and understanding vary between one denomination and another.

This becomes obvious when consideration is given to the sort of comments that have already been offered upon the Report from within the Church of England. The most obvious concern has been over the question of power or control at the centre. Some have sought to preserve the full place of the episcopate, others to safeguard the powers of the Convocations, and others again to give wider scope and effectiveness to the voice of the laity. These comments have been prompted partly by theological reasons pure and simple, but also by a concern as to where control at the centre will in practice be located, if and when changes are made. These concerns are very understandable given the Church of England as it is, but they are very much the sort of concerns that go with the first understanding of government rather than the second.

However, there are some signs that the members of the Commission were able to see things somewhat differently. They betray an obvious

and praiseworthy concern for the life of the Church away from the centre—'synodical government itself is even more important for the diocese.' And the Report spends a considerable part of its space in mapping out suggested changes within the diocese and even down to ruri-decanal and parish level. And it is this which a Presbyterian commentator sees as being of even more real importance than the other. For years now the Church of England has been struggling at the centre with the revision of Canon Law, and this has its importance and its practical use, but nothing like the same governmental concern has been given to the effective redeployment of the Church's resources at diocesan and parish level, nor do these things seem to arouse the same central passions. Spiritual oversight seems to come a poor second where the government of the Church is concerned. It is understandable that Anglo-catholics and Broad Churchmen and Evangelicals should be deeply concerned about decisions at the centre concerning, say, the doctrine and ordering of the Sacrament, concerning vestments and liturgical revision, but a more desperately needed and urgent revision is that of the pattern of Church life in each parish and local area, and here what the Report has to say, e.g. about ruri-decanal synods, is of much interest.

The Commission lays down the primary function or object of the ruri-decanal synod as being 'to focus the interest of the various parishes of the deanery on problems affecting the whole Church as well as local ones and foster a sense of community and inter dependence'. This is excellent so far as it goes, but it is not government and it is not really oversight. Indeed it is a form of words that might not trouble an Independently-minded Congregationalist and reflects the fact that there are many Anglican parishes, probably most, which partake in considerable measure of a sort of ecclesiastical Independency, the power of the Congregational Meeting being effectively replaced by the parson's freehold. It is possible to detect the beginnings of inter dependence here and there, but spiritual oversight of the parish and its incumbent is in practice largely absent. The average vicar is apt to be as strongly in favour of the theory of episcopacy as he is critical of the person and work of his own and other bishops. Provided he keeps more or less within the law, civil and ecclesiastical, each incumbent seems largely to go his own way and there seems to be very little that his bishop or anyone else can do about it.

When Presbyterians are faced with the Anglican claims for episcopacy as a necessary part of the united Church of the future, the function of Presbytery is often put forward as embodying a form of corporate episcopacy, oversight by a council rather than an individual. And many of us hope that the Church of the future will comprehend both these forms of government and oversight. But this is perhaps the time and place to make clear the differences that exist between Presbyterians and Anglicans, not only over the question of individual or corporate episcopacy, but over the meaning and function of the Church in government and oversight. The present Anglican situation in England, which is tantamount to what may paradoxically be called 'Episcopalian Independency', is something that a Presbyterian sees as making it very much more difficult for the Church to be truly the

Church, inasmuch as any effective discipline is largely absent. Unless there is an actual breach of the law, civil or ecclesiastical, the parson can apparently abuse his freehold with impunity. He is not subject to the effective spiritual oversight of the Church at large in respect of the faithful discharge of his calling, and if and when he falls short there is often little or nothing that the bishop or anyone else can do about it.

There are backsliding clerics in every denomination and there are laggard congregations, and today particularly it is a matter of urgency that there should be ways and means whereby effective oversight can be given. This is perhaps the most important part of church government and in order to spell out what this means in a Presbyterian context it may be helpful to describe in some detail an important part of the regular mechanics of spiritual oversight within the Presbyterian Church. No Presbyterian would want to pretend that what is described here works ideally as it should, but at least it does provide the accepted, authorised, regular framework within which the oversight of ministers and congregations is actually carried out.

Every five years each Congregation within the Presbytery is visited by a team of four deputies, two ministers and two elders, appointed by the Presbytery for the task, a different four being chosen for each visitation. The visit is preceded some months earlier by the completion of detailed schedules, of a sort not unknown in Anglican Circles, though in addition to matters of fabric and finance, and regarded as more important than these, are questionnaires concerned with attendance at worship, Sunday School strength, impact on the neighbourhood, outreach, Christian stewardship, concern for the wider work of the church etc. The actual visitation will include a consultation with the minister about his work in and with the Congregation; and corresponding consultations with the Session of Ruling Elders concerning the spiritual life and work of the Congregation and with the Financial Authority concerning the finance and fabric. The four deputies then prepare a detailed report and suggest a list of Findings, which are considered by the Spiritual Oversight Committee of the Presbytery, before being brought before the Presbytery itself, when the whole Report is read and the suggested Findings discussed and voted upon. The resultant authoritative decisions of the Presbytery are subsequently read to the Congregation on a suitable occasion, usually in the course of public worship, and their Session is required to report within a stated time what actions have been taken in respect of any recommendations or instructions that the Presbytery may have given.

This, the Quinquennial Visitation, is one of the principal planks of government or oversight in the Presbyterian system and it is inevitably against this sort of background that a Presbyterian reads this Report on 'Government by Synod'. Now this might appear as no more than a polite scoring of points were this Report to be judged as something which is only a domestic concern of the Church of England, but no denomination is any longer free to enjoy this sort of privilege. The point must be made that the level of much discussion so far has not passed beyond the point of how much authority the bishops or the Convocations are to continue to enjoy or how much additional voice is to be given to the laity within a broad continuance of the present set-

up. The essential pattern of Anglican government remains unchanged, not least because the main concern of many in the Church, though not necessarily of the Report itself, has been centred on the question of sovereignty at the domestic and largely clerical centre.

This over-riding concern is not unconnected with the nature of the Anglican Establishment and its history since the Reformation. In her religious policies Elizabeth I was acutely aware of the political repercussions of any religious settlement upon the security of her throne and it is not surprising that the daughter of Henry VIII did nothing to encourage what may be described as emergent democracy in matters ecclesiastical. The continuing result of this has been that the characteristic Anglican understanding of oversight has been of something performed by individuals, be they bishops or curates. Where, however, Anglicanism has been removed geographically from its roots and social surroundings it has moved more significantly in the direction of true synodical government and a more real understanding of the corporate nature of the Church and its responsibility for oversight. Anglicanism overseas can be a very different thing from Anglicanism in England, not least for the reason that its bishops and clergy are not influenced to the same degree by their historic association with the secular powers that be. Much can be said in favour of establishment, but, especially in the form that it still takes in England, it does make it more difficult for the Church to be the Church and not merely the State dressed up in its Sunday best.

Nevertheless this problem of clericalism, for this is what this tradition and practice really amount to, is more than a question of history and the form of the Anglican Establishment: it also has its supporters on theological grounds. When the Rev. Michael Bruce writes, in his note on p. 110 of the Report, of the restoration of synodical government, 'so that each diocese is governed by the Bishop with the advice of his clergy and the informed consent of the laity', his careful use of words reveals a doctrine of the episcopate, the ordained ministry and the laity which must inevitably perpetuate the essence of the *status quo* and which largely makes nonsense of the theological basis of the Report represented by the statement on p. 14 that 'there is now general agreement . . . that theology justifies and history demonstrates that the ultimate authority and right of collective action lie with the whole body, the Church, and that the co-operation of Clergy and Laity in Church Government and discipline belongs to the true ideal of the Church'. It is paradoxical that Mr. Bruce, and those who think like him, while cherishing many excellent insights into the merits of synodical government, should yet cling to an understanding of episcopacy which is a sort of ecclesiastical equivalent of the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings. Yet it must be carefully pointed out that the argument against this does not rest upon the importation into the field of theology of the modern theory of political democracy: *vox populi* is not necessarily *vox dei*. The argument rests upon the right theological understanding of the nature of the Church as the whole body of Christ, within which each has his or her particular gift and calling, bishops included. Dr. Kirk failed in his attempt to establish the utter dependence of the Church upon the episcopate, and in an ecumenical climate

where there is widespread readiness among the non-episcopal churches to unite into an episcopal church it would be tragic if this were to be frustrated or indefinitely postponed by extreme doctrines held by a dwindling minority.

Yet there are other difficulties for Anglicans in the acceptance of real synodical government besides the doctrines of episcopacy held by Anglo-catholics. Many other Anglican clergy would, in practice, be very reluctant to share their pastoral responsibility in any real degree with their laity. This may be less a matter of theology than of custom and usage, but precisely for that reason may be less amenable to discussion. The clerical/lay antithesis is something that penetrates very deeply into the unconscious and may well prove very resistant to therapy. Yet it may be possible to remove certain areas of misunderstanding. No Presbyterian minister is likely to find one of his elders interfering in a matter of direct, personal pastoral concern between the minister and one of his flock. Indeed a Presbyterian minister's personal pastoral work is done in essentially the same way as that of an Anglican and with the same privacy and confidence. The place of the elder in the pastoral work within the Congregation is two-fold; he is himself responsible for a portion of the flock, usually between six and a dozen families, whom he visits regularly in his discharge of the responsibility of oversight; and, with the other members of the Session of Ruling Elders, he is responsible with the Minister for exercising spiritual oversight over the whole flock, giving leadership and example, maintaining discipline, making policy decisions etc. This is Christian 'collective action' and would be quite impossible if the role of the elder were to be reduced to that of 'informed consent'. The same degree of collective action is apparent in the higher courts of the Church in Presbyterianism, for both in Presbytery and General Assembly the elders are equal in number to the Ministers or out-number them, having equal rights of speech and vote. The whole system of meeting and voting by separate houses as it now obtains in Anglicanism is foreign to the Presbyterian understanding of synodical government and appears detrimental to the possibility of real collective action. It is significant that very recently an experiment has been made within the Church of England in what would seem to be the right direction, though it is appreciated that the matter of sheer size and numbers is a very real problem here.

What is really at stake however is the basic understanding of the Church and its ministry. Modern scholarship has shown convincingly that the primary meaning of the word 'ministry' is not what some in the Church, the clergy, perform for others, the laity, but that it is something that the whole Church is called to perform to the world, the continuance of the ministry of Christ. This means that both 'clergy' and 'laity' have part together in the ministry of the Church. It does not mean that the differences between 'clergy' and 'laity' are obliterated, but it does alter the common understanding of the clergy/laity antithesis as it has been held since mediaeval times. The laity are not there simply to occupy pews, to sing hymns and put money in the collection, to be faithful communicants, to give their loyal support and 'informed consent'; they have a ministry, a diakonia to perform;

they are the Church in no merely dependent capacity. We are only now beginning to see our way to some renewed understanding of Confirmation in the light of this insight, that it is in some real sense a sort of 'ordination' to active participation in the total ministry of the Church and not merely a sort of certificate-receiving ceremony whereby the candidate is given the right to be ministered to in receiving the Sacrament. This renewed understanding of what 'ministry' means produces, not an antithesis between the ordained and the lay, wherein the one ministers to the other, but the authorising of different people to do different things in the Church according to the gifts of the Spirit. This in no way minimises the meaning of ordination to the ministry of the Word and Sacraments, but sets that particular ministry in the context of the total ministry of the whole Church.

This is the key to something that puzzles many Anglicans, the fact that a Presbyterian Elder is both ordained and a 'layman'. He is ordained in the sense that he is believed by the Church to have been given the gift of the Spirit for the task of leadership and oversight within the Congregation and to have been called by God to perform this function. He is accordingly solemnly set apart with prayer and authorised. But this ordination to the eldership and his induction to membership of the Session of Ruling Elders within the Congregation does not confer upon him authority to celebrate the Sacrament, for this is not something to which the Church believes him to have been called, it is not part of his God-given ministry. But it is part of his ministry to share with the minister and his fellow members of Session in the government and oversight of the Congregation.

Important though these more theological considerations are, they cannot be considered to the exclusion of other more practical concerns. Within the context of the parish or congregation the old concept of a community of souls being ministered to by an incumbent can no longer honestly be held in its former simplicity. This is not to deny the continuing validity of the pastoral task of the parish priest, but he is no longer set to fulfil it in the circumstances of a former age. The church and its ministrations are no longer accepted as once they were, and the parish has become in some senses an unreal concept. Further, each parish now finds itself in a missionary situation where the agent of mission is not simply the incumbent but the whole congregation, the people of God together in that place. And it is this renewed activity of the laity in being the Church that is bursting asunder the old clerical/lay antithesis and forcing the Church to re-consider its attitude to the non-ordained. If this is what the laity ought to be doing, if they have this part in the total ministry of the Church by God's will (and who today is going to deny it?) then they must obviously have a concomitant share in decision-making and oversight and all the other tasks that properly belong to the whole Church collectively.

It is, however, one thing to assent to this in theory and another to put it into practice. Many incumbents are jealous of their rights and privileges, and are fearful of losing a firm grasp upon the reins of parish life and activity. Others might comment that they would be only too glad to find their parishioners beginning to show signs of initiative and unprompted action. The traditions and habits of thought of

centuries die hard and some of the numbed limbs of the Church can hardly be expected to spring into activity the moment they are released from a cramped situation of such long standing. There is still a tremendous task of education and encouragement to be performed before lay people become accustomed to thinking of themselves as being the Church and having a real part in its ministry; too many are still entirely consumer-minded and feel that their place is in the pew and nowhere else, and too many clerics are still prepared to leave them supine in their misunderstanding. We all have a long way to go before the ministering Church is refashioned out of a Church most of whose members regard their function and place as that of being ministered to by those appointed for the purpose. Just as the ecumenical movement does not make sense unless we realise that what we are seeking is one Church united for mission, so synodical government must remain a largely academic exercise unless and until it is seen as a vital part of the reordering of the Church to equip it for the task of mission and ministry to the world.

However, there is another important consequence which derives from the Report's excellent basic assertion that 'the ultimate authority and right of collective action lie with the whole body, the Church . . .'. This concerns the relationship between the bishops and the remainder of the clergy. Just as the Church has come to a changed attitude towards the clerical/lay antithesis, so is there urgent need for reconsideration of the place and authority of the bishop. The sort of theories advanced by Bishop Kirk and his friends in *The Apostolic Ministry* no longer command any significant theological support, nevertheless the often exclusive claims for episcopacy continue to be advanced by some Anglicans without any very clear theological backing.

The alternative is not between episcopacy and non-episcopacy, but between a 'constitutional' episcopacy and a 'prelatical' one. In Anglican/Presbyterian Conversations we have become familiar with the idea of a 'Bishop-in-Presbytery' and the possibility of this ever becoming a reality depends largely upon the practical interpretation put upon this phrase. What would be the relation of the Bishop to the Presbytery? What is said on p. 47 of the Report concerning the relation of the bishop to the diocesan synod, vague though it is, does not make happy reading for a Presbyterian. What are the 'functions distinctively belonging to the bishop by virtue of his episcopal office'? What is subsumed under the category 'any matter falling within his pastoral office and inherent episcopal rights'? No Presbyterian would imagine for a moment that the diocesan synod or presbytery should seek to infringe upon the bishop's essential pastoral function as father in God to his flock. This is strictly parallel to what has already been said about the relation between the pastoral function of the Presbyterian minister over against that of his Session of Ruling Elders. Nor would a Presbyterian expect the synod to usurp the function of the bishop in ordination, recognising what this means to Anglicans, but what else resides peculiarly in the office and function of the bishop in which the synod may be denied its concern and participation?

What, of course, is really in question here is the 'character' of the

episcopal office. This has no exact 'official' definition at present within Anglicanism, and obviously any attempt to provide such a definition would run the grave danger of shattering the organisational unity of the Church of England. But how far is it possible to define the relations between bishop and synod without saying something more than is said in the Report about the nature of episcopacy? The characteristic solution to this problem is to take refuge in deliberate ambiguity, as in the reports on Anglican/Methodist relations, but this demands a parallel vagueness in the definition of the function and authority of the synod, and this is hardly likely to be helpful to the positive development of synodical government.

One Presbyterian, who sees clearly that the united Church of the future will be episcopal, hopes that this episcopacy will be so embedded in a frame of synodical government as to make the bishop *primus inter pares*, the ultimate authority under Christ being held synodically and not individually, the episcopal function being primarily pastoral. It is in this way, surely, that the peculiar contributions of Episcopalianism and Presbyterianism can both be used to the fullest extent, giving to Presbyterianism that individual oversight over its ordained ministry that it at present lacks, and giving to Episcopalianism that fuller participation in its wider councils by clergy and laity that it still lacks.
