

Collaborative Order In The Church

Throughout history, the Church has appropriated to itself structure and modes of operating that were current in its milieu, to its advantage and disadvantage. Thus the Church has, at times, been hierarchical, bureaucratic, egalitarian and, at present, with whatever mixture of the above, impersonally organizational. But an important mode of the Church is not so prized these days; that is, the collaborative order of the Church.

Collaboration is that process whereby individuals who know what their work is, do it in concert with others like minded individuals to produce a work greater than their individual ones. The collaborative order of the Church includes, firstly, both direct and intermediate activity of the Holy Spirit; secondly, all the people of God as the locus, agents, and exemplars of the mountain moving energy produced by the Spirit of God; and thirdly, it includes the Church constitutional, that is, the Church as God instituted it: Keys of the Kingdom, sacraments, prayer, ordained ministry, Bible, teachers, assembling of the saints, prophets, dreams, and whatever else God has created for the enabling of the Church.

One place and work in the Kingdom of God is by appointment only and that, of the King Himself. That is what gives it its fittingness both to the individual's most inner satisfaction and to the greater work which God is doing. A healthy body, as St. Paul knew, is an excellent illustration of collaborative order; not one organ useless, not one independent, not one capable of duplicating another's activity, not one the "total picture," but everyone honored, all harmonious with one another, and all indispensable for the total health of the body of which Jesus Christ is Head. The collaborative order is well illustrated in at least one Biblical evidence.

One may well ask why the Church did not remain a Party within Judaism or a Jewish fringe sect, or why indeed, it did not die out as such; or why it was that the Church did not split up into two churches, as ongoing dynamics might have it, a Jewish Church and a Gentile one. That it did not is due in large part to a certain prosaic church gathering at Jerusalem at which the collaborative order was evident. As told by St. Luke in Acts, chapter fifteen, how ingeniously unreflective and naive was this collaboration.

The problem started in the Church at Antioch. It seems that most of the believers were Gentiles and that a nucleus of Jewish believers in the Lord from Jerusalem had come down to Antioch to get these Gentile believers to be circumcised, to become Jews first in order to be proper Christians. The apostles Paul and Barnabas, at that time of the Antioch Church

"had a long argument with these men... and finally it was arranged that Paul and Barnabas and others of the Church should go up to Jerusalem and discuss the problem with the apostles and elders... all the members of the Church (of Antioch) saw them off... when they arrived in Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the Church, and by the apostles and elders... but

certain members of the Pharisees party who had become believers objected... the apostles and elders met to look into the matter and after the discussion had gone on a long time, Peter stood up and addressed them."

I have never heard the above passage quoted to prove that the Bible is true but it may well be used for that purpose. How true to life is this whole affair! How not of the honor of an "apostle" it is to hold a long argument with "these men" and how like the apostle Paul, or rather Paul the Beleaguer to do so! One can almost feel the confusion and uncertainty of the Antioch brethren and the final breakthrough of resolution to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem. One can almost see hopeful faces of the Church members as they see them off. How all are so highly involved with these vexing problems. And look how appropriately the problem now surfaces at its source in Jerusalem, among the believers of the Pharisaic party, to meet the Antiochean envoys, Paul and Barnabas; and with what seriousness the apostles and elders confer to settle and solve, and for how long they discussed! How totally, the imagination of the reader might supply with complete congruence, and with what conviction does each individual and configuration of parties, fulfill their offices and personages.

Surely this was the time for a message from God, a prophecy, a dream, a word of knowledge (and why had these not occurred back in Antioch before things had gotten "out of hand"). Then Peter the Rock stood up and spoke (surely the reader of "Acts" will remember at this point, with St. Luke, him courageous that rock was when in Pilate's courtyard, a woman spotted him out, or with St. Paul, how valiant Peter was when he "excused himself" from this present Gentile dinner company at the unexpected coming of James and the Kosher crew); this Peter stood up, St. Luke records, and spoke God's Holy Truth, and that granted to him by God's personal and very private revelation! How God chose him first to go the Gentiles ("You know perfectly well that it was so."), how God made it clear to him in a vision on a roof that all nations were acceptable to Him (St. Luke has already informed the reader how in Chapter 10), how that Gentiles, as well as they, have received the same Holy Spirit, how they ought not to anger God by burdening others with what they could not handle themselves, and finally, to remember that the Jews are saved the same way as the Gentiles, "Through the grace of the Lord Jesus." It wasn't a revelation and a vision, it was merely the relating of a revelation and a vision but, through Peter, it came with the conviction of true witness. "This silenced the entire community." How perfectly does just this one sentence set off the character of the meeting up until now as tumultuous and discordant. After Peter offered what God had given him to offer, Barnabas and Paul offered what they were given not revelation or even the relating of one, as had Peter but the testimony of empirical evidence, what they had seen and heard, "describing all the signs and wonders God had worked through them among the gentiles." One may wonder whether Peter's word from the Lord ought not to have sufficed for the Church. Was the Church hardened to the Lord? Or perhaps that Peter had not spoken from the Lord. One may wonder, but St. Luke does not. For what he recounts seems to him to be normal and right, God's way for the Spirit-filled Church, howbeit according to human

possibilities, liable, on one hand, to redundancy, on the other, to contradiction, contention, and confusion.

After Barnabas and Paul finished their show and tell (surely, in God's compassion, for the "show me, I'm from Missouri" crowd), the most Jewish of them all got up (what exquisite timing and casting provided by the press of real life). Jacob (James), bishop of Jerusalem, with little use for "religious experience" and much less for "private revelations", was the if-it's-not-in-the-Bible-it's-not-from-God Scripture man. James arose and he answered and said, Yes, "my brothers," what Peter said was "entirely in harmony with the words of the Prophets since the Scriptures say," and then James quotes from the book of Amos how God would one day raise up the fallen House of David ("and thank God He has already done that in Jesus, David's greater Son!," one must imagine various of the believers murmuring) and that *then* the Gentiles will turn to the Lord God ("so that is what explains all those strange happenings among the Gentiles!") And then, without so much as stopping for breath, decides, rules, or promulgates the edict which forever has kept, from the viewpoint of the Acts, the holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, one, and which edict is essentially, and as to tone, thus:

Now, send a letter to all the Churches saying, let's not make it hard for the Goyim (Gentiles) to come to God. But on the other hand, let's not upset the Jewish brethren (you know you're sure to find synagogues in every town), so let's just tell the Goyim not to drink blood or some other flagrantly offensive non-Jewish practice.

James, a true "Rodef Shalom" (pursuer of peace) is thus following the dictum "for the sake of peace" or most positively, as our Lord taught, "blessed are the peacemakers." God bless you, James! (How heartwarming to note that this one of the first exercises of the Apostolic authority of "binding and loosing" was a decree of *releasing* from obligation and that for no "weightier" theological consideration than the furthering of love and peace in the Christian community!) How unlike each other are Peter, Paul and James and how each was needed to contribute exactly what God had vicariously and uniquely given to them for the common good of the Church.

That is not the end of the story, nor the end of the collaborative effort. After James had given his decree, the whole weight of the Jerusalem Church came into play. The letter was sent from "the apostle *and* elders" (the personages in God's order), "your brothers" (the heart tug) and was sent back with both the *Antiochean* delegates, Paul and Barnabas plus two *Jerusalemite* delegates, Judas and Silas, "leading men" (big guns), who were chosen to go by "*concurrence* of the *whole* Jerusalem Church" (every little pea shooter). This exquisite casting of the fabric of real life dynamics indicates either that St. Luke has fabricated this account after having taken the complete "Community Organization and Social Mobilization" cycle of courses at the local School of Social Work, or else that the Bible is indeed true. The letter said something in addition to what James specified should be in the letter, but entirely fitting to both the authority given by Christ to the Church and to the actual sense of how God works through His people

when they meet and work and think and pray together in the matchless Name of Jesus, "It has been decided by the Holy Spirit, and ourselves." And here is the follow-up at Antioch. "The party left and went down to Antioch, where they summoned the whole community and delivered the letter. The community read it and were delighted with the encouragement it gave them. Judas and Silas, being themselves prophets, spoke for a long time encouraging and strengthening the brothers." (How interesting that that is functioning prophetically and that that has not occurred until this point.) And as far as the rest of the church were concerned, Paul and Barnabas "visited one town after another and they passed on the decisions reached by the Apostles and Elders in Jerusalem, with instructions to respect them ("instructions to respect", not "suggestions to consider" or "recommendations for ratification") and so the churches grew strong in the faith as well as growing daily in numbers" (My underline, for so important for St. Luke understanding of the growth of the Church are these little summary sentences.)

There are many ways that God may and does without Himself collaborating with anyone. For example, when He raised Christ from the dead or sent the Holy Spirit upon His assembled children for the first time, or filled Gentiles with that same Holy Spirit as He had the Jewish believers in the Lord (to the amazement of the latter). God also leads His people, those who trust in Him, through His unmistakable voice. The Christian disciple will not be surprised to be surprised by God's uncollaborative revelation to him and unique guidance. But it is that unique call of God to us and our obedience to it which brings us into the true morality of collaboration with each other. If God gives us a word to speak, our labor is to speak it, or a silence, to maintain it, to preach on the street corner, then that is our labor; perhaps a prophecy, or a simple, menial and life-long task. So be it. The only thing that need be of "matter" to us is God's call. Obedience to that removes both pride and self-doubt and makes true collaboration possible. The more we pay attention to God's call in our lives and less on ourselves and others, the more will we all be rightly related as co-laborers in His vineyard and the more His Kingdom will be apparent to all. What has God said to you lately?

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