

## **Wheels Within Wheels: The Promise and Scandal of Anglican Conciliarism**

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### **I. The Nature of Christian Concord**

I have been invited to talk about something called “conciliarism” and its relevance for our life as Anglican Christians. There is an obvious reason for exposing this topic in a public forum within our church. And this is because, in the current struggle within Anglicanism, we have, both by default and by design, ended up acting out a debate over whether our Christian lives as churches *together* are to be governed by “common consent” within a council, or by some other, more local, individual, or informal means. And more generally, although conciliarism is not exactly a hot topic within the larger world, there has been increased academic interest in the subject of late. Last year, a fine book appeared on the matter by the Anglican Paul Avis. A couple of years ago, the great Medieval scholar and educationalist Francis Oakley came out with the first popular overview of the subject ever, published by Oxford University Press. And over the past 50 years, there has been a steady and lively scholarly stream of research on conciliarism emerging, especially in the journals. My own plan during this conference is to provide you with a brief overview of the concept of conciliarism, historically and theologically – that is what I will do in my first talk – and then, in my second talk, do some application of the concept and practice to our current situation within Anglicanism.

#### ***1. Use of the term***

Let me begin with a reflection on the concept of conciliarism itself, before turning to a kind of historical and theological consideration of its meaning.

“Conciliarism” may indeed strike many as just a fancy word that, if you know much about it at all, refers to an obscure debate within the Catholic Church of long ago. As usually understood, Conciliarists were a particular party within the Western Church during the late Middle Ages that claimed for the General *Council* – a legitimate gathering of all the (usually) bishops of the Church -- a superiority of rule, vis a vis the Pope’s authority, when it came to the Church’s life. “Conciliarists” were those who favored the authority of the “council” over that of the individual Roman pontiff, as it were.

To talk of conciliarism, in this light, may make it seem as if the concept is one primarily bound to political theory and even abstraction, dealing with the matters of how bodies are governed, but also getting us into abstruse corners of historical debate. And there is some truth to this intuition. It is true that, for instance, the great Anglican political historian John Neville Figgis claimed that medieval conciliarism in fact laid the groundwork for modern Western “constitutionalism”, and this view is now shared by many other scholars. Still, the topic, it is fair to say, has remained

one confined to the debates of specialists in legal and canonical history, rather than in theology. And part of the problem is how conciliarists themselves, both in the past and even today, have tended to approach their subject. As medieval arguments over who has what authority to rule on this or that evolved, they tended to do so, even among conciliarists, increasingly on the basis of categories of “natural right” or “sovereignty” or “common good”, rather than on the basis of the “law of Christ” or the specifically theological nature of “Christ’s Body” (see Tierney, pp. 132-141 and Oakley, *Natural Law*, ch. 14). So that even in contemporary debate over life in the Roman Catholic church, a modern conciliarist like Oakley applies his historical expertise to a call for “democracy” in the Church, as if that is obviously how conciliarism translates into our present day – people over Pope, collective over individual, representative voting over hierarchical declaration, and so on. And today’s argument over conciliarism, to the degree that it happens at all, often takes place on the basis of this kind of political category, rather than using more traditional theological ones.

The evolution of scholarly interest in conciliarism in fact tracks the Church’s own general attitudes towards authority as well, at least on one level. As historians have noted, discussions of authority in the Church manifest an increased “juridification” of thinking over time. Already by the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the legal term *jurisdictio* had entered the Church’s vocabulary for ecclesial order, and by the 12<sup>th</sup> century the discussion regarding authority had completely shifted from Scriptural terms to the vocabulary of Roman civil law and its canonical analogues within the Church. At the height of the conciliar debate in the 15th century, then, the argument over papal authority was usually couched in terms of the nature of his “jurisdiction”, either received from Peter and handed to bishops as his political functionaries, or received by bishops on behalf of the people, acting somehow consensually according to the natural rights of a commonwealth. There was much less discussion than one might perhaps expect concerning the *character* of episcopal or papal oversight in terms of sacramental office as bound to the Body of Christ (Oakley, p. 9), whether through baptism or some other reality. And it is from this peculiar way of framing the discussion that the issues of “constitutionalism” were to arise: whether there is a theoretical and practical ordering of common life according to a predetermined legal framework of representation and consent, a question medieval and, obviously later thinkers began to investigate. In any case, what we begin to see over time is that the possible framework for such an ordering of common life – its “constitution” – becomes the subject of academic and polemical interest, rather than the goal of common life itself being the subject, a matter which would more properly be construed in terms of the Body of Christ and its inner charity. The conciliarist track, then, follows the Church’s own concern with legal process rather than with objective character, a movement that the Reformation, at least originally, had attempted to reorder.

Conciliarism, from within this developing debate over church order, can be defined (as one scholar puts it) in the following way: it describes and upholds a “complex pattern of collaborative episcopal governance and synodal activity” (Oakley, p. 4), whose form and process protects the church from the abuse of individualized or localized power. And it is easy to get wrapped up in the juridical details of this “complex pattern”, as has been happening within the Anglican Communion in the course of the debate over the Covenant and the nature of “juridical” and “jurisdictional” authority: who ought to be making “authoritative” decisions within our midst -- autonomous provinces or confessional standards or primatial conferences and so on.

Still, there is a more simple meaning to the term “conciliarity” that we must grasp more fundamentally if we are to make sense of this entire topic. To offer “counsel” or “take counsel” means simply to “gather together”, in the sense of actively bringing into one place a diverse group of individuals; to have a “council” (a word of different origin than the first) means to “call together”. The two words – counsel and council – nonetheless converge. Conciliarism, then, is, at its root, simply about “gathering” the Church together. And I have written elsewhere (see “Why a Covenant and Why its Conciliar Form”, ACI, July, 2007) about its New Testament basis, at least conceptually, in terms of the “one-mindedness” that we are both made a part of and called more deeply into through the reality of Christ’s “gathering” mission: Jesus seeks to “gather” the children of Jerusalem (Lk. 23:37), and “all the children of God” and make them “one” (Jn. 11:52), and his final historical act is to “gather the elect” from the four corners of the world. (Mt. 24:31). But this he does through his own life, death, and resurrection, and in no other way. The gathering of the Church in that “one mind” that is Jesus’ (as in Phil. 2:1-11) is this act.

But if it is *this* act, and not another, “gathering” the Church is also a concrete act or set of acts and not just a general attitude; and if it is the Church’s concrete acts that are in question, as she enacts “Jesus’ mind”, then the response to the Gospel’s call to “gather” must indeed take the form of concrete political processes, and the range of juridical and jurisdictional questions cannot simply be thrust aside as either irrelevant or simply boring. The challenge of conciliarism lies, in part, in finding the bridge between the goal and process, something that I have always assumed the reality of “communion”, as it has been so much discussed of late, is all about.

## 2. *History*

The 14<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of formal debate over the proper jurisdiction of pope, bishop, council, and people. In an era where local politics, the need to rationalize church law, bureaucratic constraints upon ecclesiastical reform, and the freedoms of missionary witness were all at issue, among other things, writers like John of Paris, Marsilius of Padua, and William of Occam were among the most celebrated writers who defended, from a variety of viewpoints, limitations upon the Pope’s authority. When the Papacy itself left Rome for Avignon, coming under the perceived thumb of French rule, rival popes and parties arose (1378-1417), placing the Church’s life in a scandal of confusion, acrimony, and subverted witness. It is during this period that “conciliarism” as a specific movement was invented, spurred on by those who believed that a General Council, held independently of a fallen papacy, was the only means by which to restore the Church’s life. That council, which took place at Constance from 1414-1417, is generally viewed as the high-water mark of conciliarist life: it not only resolved the problem of the (then) three rival popes, but it articulated, through the decree *Haec Sancta* (1415), a full formulation of the conciliar perspective. Among the writers and thinkers associated with this episode are Conrad of Gelnhausen and Jean Gerson, as well as Nicholas of Cusa (see below).

Conciliarism is generally seen as having precipitously declined in influence soon after Constance, largely because of the new Pope, Martin V’s, successful repudiation of its achievements – the status of *Haec Sancta* is, as a result of his initial efforts and those his immediate successors, officially without substance according to the Vatican (although that has been disputed by some canonists and theologians even to this day). The Papacy was also able to

defang its political opponents at the subsequent Council of Basle (1431-49), which ended with the conciliarists in disarray, in open defiance of the pope, and finding themselves (and not the Pope) the cause of a new schism. Meanwhile, some of the conciliarists' own most prominent proponents, like Nicholas of Cusa, had moved on to other interests, abandoning their former colleagues-in-arms for the papacy's new goals of maintaining the unity of Empire and a common front against Islam in the East.

Conciliarist teaching and writing continued, however, in Paris especially, and many theologians who passed through 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> century French scholastic training imbibed it. When England's Henry VIII struggled to deal with the challenges of his line of succession, and through it his divorce, the navigation of his struggle with papacy and empire was, for a period, entrusted to the advice of conciliarists among him, like Edward Fox and Cuthbert Tunstall. Originally Henry appealed to a General Council, properly convened in a safe place by a reigning prince – this according to a line of conciliarist reasoning that gave a pride of place to the secular order within the constitution of the Church's historical life; but when matters became too complex on this front to control, Henry turned to other strategies, and the conciliarist influence at his court quickly waned.

One might have thought that the growing confusion and chaos within the Church brought on by the protests of Luther, and the instability of France, let alone by the disengagements of England from Rome, would have led even the Pope to consider the value of calling for an authoritative council to bring some order. Luther had originally appealed his own case to a council, and Calvin had also spoken of their usefulness. And, on a deeper level, it is possible to view the impetus of much of the Reformation itself as a “continuation of conciliarism by other means”, to paraphrase Avis and others. But the balancing of local interests was so complex at the time as to rule out a simple convention – who to invite, and where, and under what circumstances? What were to be the bases of agreement, the *modus conciliandi*? What did it mean to have an “agreed statement”? The failure of the meeting at Ratisbone 1542, between Protestant and Roman theologians, after several previous false starts, witnessed to these difficulties. These were and remain familiar themes and obstacles to Christian unity. When Trent was finally summoned in 1545 by the Pope (after at least two previously unsuccessful attempts at gathering) the divisions were so entrenched, and alienation so rooted that reforming parties were by and large left out. By this time, in any case, Protestants had themselves sowed doubts as to the usefulness and authority of councils, in contrast to principles of Scriptural integrity apart from conciliar teaching, and Catholics had pretty much firmly embraced the papalist view of jurisdiction.

I shall have a good deal to say about conciliarism in Anglicanism in the next talk. Leaving this aside for now, we can simply observe that, in the wake of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, conciliarism continued to have really only two streams of positive influence. First, the writings of the French conciliarists especially proved helpful to English Puritans who sought to justify, through appeals to natural law and natural constitutions, their right to overthrow an unjust monarch, even to execute him. This was clearly not a direct application of catholic conciliarist thought, but it drew on the rich implications of its legal elaboration and on certain specific principles already enunciated. Second, for a variety of reasons, the French Catholic church maintained a strong susceptibility to conciliarist ideals, which led in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, to the development of the so-called “Gallican” vision of local synodical authority, over and sometimes against the

Papacy. This movement, led by prominent churchmen like Bossuet, made use of medieval conciliarist writing directly, but disappeared as a force in the ruins of the Revolution, only to make whimpering noises again in the face of the Papacy's dogmatic reassertion at Vatican I. Finally, in the build-up to the Second Vatican Council, in the 1960's, conciliarist thought reappeared positively within the Roman church, spurred by consideration of what a "council" was and should be, and analyzed by bright thinkers like Hans Kung. Much of the modern scholarly interest in conciliarism was fanned during this era, although its place at the center of contemporary Roman Catholic ecclesiology has disappeared. Modern Anglicanism, by contrast, has had little explicit interest in conciliarism as a topic, but has in fact been quite deliberately engaged in its debate, and in concrete and experimental ways, over the past century, as I shall argue in my second talk.

### 3. *Meaning*

There are at least three levels at which we can look at the motives and interests of this history:

*a. The political perspective.* This is the most obvious and most interesting perspective to historians (for a neat summary, see Black, pp. 130-135). But it is perhaps the least interesting to theologians, and, in present circumstances, this perspective is perhaps the least helpful, because of its historically constrained meanings and motives. We see this in response to Anglican Communion concerns today, where in our present debate every decision and justification regarding polity and political decision-making is proving *ad hoc*, and therefore is being viewed and manipulated as the product of "interests" and subject to the whims of "power". As everyone, from bishop to anonymous blog-writer becomes both expert canon lawyer and inventor of a new regime, Lambeth and Primates are relativized – so is Canterbury, of course -- even while the ACC is elevated (or vice versa), in large measure because different "councils" and authorities or offices serve varying groups well or less well, and their interests either need to be better promoted or more successfully balanced. When conciliarism is limited to the analysis and manipulation of power by this or that group and its interests, its value in understanding the vocation of the Church clearly diminishes. Indeed, within a utilitarian political vision, two things happen: first, a fundamental wedge is placed between Gospel and historical Church, such that the order and communal life of the church is a matter "indifferent", so long as it serves the Gospel (however that is defined) usefully. But second, by separating church politics from the Gospel, one can lay open the door to allowing those politics a kind of free rein within historical experience – they are, after all, not that important. (This problem, it could be argued, has dogged certain forms of Lutheranism and other Protestant groups and outlooks, including, it seems, a wide swathe of Anglicans today.)

Nonetheless, we would be mistaken if we simply set aside the political level of conciliarism as too crude for our subtle theological sensibilities. For the utilitarian character of the political search for order in the Church derives from a basic moral point that conciliarists themselves understood well. This point is contained in the adage (drawn originally, I gather, from Cicero's *De officiis*) that *salus populi lex suprema esto*, the welfare of the people shall be the governing law, that is, the touchstone for all laws. The maxim is meant to underscore the need to relativize specific and positive laws where necessary for the sake of a larger goal of the "common good". And within the Christian context *salus* – where the Latin term also means "salvation" -- clearly

brings us into the context of Christ's reality: although here that reality is bound to the *populus* of the Church as a whole, the Body of Christ, rather than to individuals. In this theological context, the political reality of how authority is exercised in general, points to the *ad hoc* ecclesiological imperative that seeks to embrace *how in fact* Christ brings salvation to His people, what are actually the forms of the Church's life in history. The analytical pressure in this political reading, however, will be from Christ's side, not from the forms themselves, which is why conciliarism, politically understood, can never be so much a "law" as a "way of life". And this insight is closer to a Pauline view of the Church than to an institutionalist vision of Christian common life, as some have feared. Thus, I am ultimately not sure if the "political" aspect of conciliarism is without binding concern, from a Christian perspective. When I conclude tomorrow, I will do so on the basis of specific forms of life and gathering, not grand theological themes only – for, properly ordered, the two are essentially related. And to the degree that church leaders cannot get outside the constraints of rigid forms of ordering common life, where the situation demands it, that ordering will not reflect the underlying demands of what is truly "common life in Christ Jesus". Within Anglicanism today, both conservatives and liberals need to grasp this.

*b. The philosophical/metaphysical perspective.* The line between this and a.) is sometimes blurred. There are issues – e.g. in the nature of "decision-making" and "consent" and "representation" – that have touched basic discussions and struggles in the modern world, and in ways that go beyond the simple interests of the moment. Once one realizes that categories of "constitutionalism" and "natural law" and "natural rights" are at issue in this discussion (as they most certainly are), one understands that "how the Church decides" is rooted in something much deeper than keeping the peace between this or that group for the time being as best one can.

When Nicholas of Cusa writes what is still considered the classic conciliarist text in 1433, he entitles it the *De Concordantia Catholica*, the "Catholic Concordance". The term "concordantia" is one that Nicholas, trained as a canon lawyer first of all, has most likely borrowed directly from that field: the word designates the act of collating and rationalizing the various laws, or canons, of the church, into an integrated body of regulation. Nicholas, however, takes this perhaps technical term and applies it to ecclesial reality as a whole. The Church herself exists as *concordantia*, an integrated whole, whose life works itself out through the process of ongoing integration, of which, obviously, her conciliar activity and organization is an essential means. It is this dynamic of "work" and even "mission" – that the Church lives within the process of *concordantia* – that makes Nicholas' use of the canonical term theologically more interesting.

On one level, Nicholas uses this fundamental reference – the unity of the Church – as a the basis for an *ad hoc* or utilitarian argument about forms of governance and decision-making: if "it is for service and preservation of the unity of the faithful that rulership over individuals exist" -- *salus populi* – then all forms of such rulership, whether of pope or bishop or even council must be judged and re-formed or re-ordered with this criterion alone in mind (cf. DCC II.34.259). On another level, Nicholas' vision is, broadly analogous to Richard Hooker's, bound up with a theory of the universe as a vast interrelated (and hierarchical) network of laws, a web of divine order that holds all things together through a single, if variegated purpose. "Council", and the mechanisms upon which it is based, is reflective of this larger reality. More than this, Nicholas

believes that this single purpose is itself “unifying”, in a historical sense, on the basis of something like 1 Cor. 15:28 and Ephesians 1:10 (cf. DCC I.1): “when all things are subjected to [Christ] then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be all in all”; this is the “plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth”. Things are, if you will, “moving” in this direction of unity in God. And, as the true “body of Christ”, the Church is literally part of the substance of this movement which is the very being of Christ Jesus as He gathers His own creation to Himself. (Note that the stress of “communion” here is not on Trinitarian relationships, as is often the case in modern “communion ecclesiology”, but on the Body of Christ’s reality as it moves through time.) The character of the Church’s decision-making, in any case, is therefore a part of “the way things are”, and not only a matter of *ad hoc* arrangements. One can speak of “natural law” in relation to councils, then, if one has this or some other working metaphysical notion functioning with respect to the nature of creation and its differences. (Contemporary exponents of the “democratic” church have tended not to have such a metaphysical framework for their claims, which they have either simply assumed, or tried to coordinate with unelaborated theories that equate baptism with a form of church government. This lack of a metaphysical framework may not be a problem – cf. some forms of Puritanism – as long as there is at least an alternative, and necessarily robust Scriptural framework governing the conceptions. Alas, this is rarely the case.)

*c. The theological perspective.* Although Nicholas is working, as we know, with a kind of neo-platonic metaphysics in all of this, he is also doing so on the basis of a broader theological tradition, one based on the relationship of Scripture and history. This brings us to our third perspective – the theological -- for analyzing and perhaps applying conciliarist thinking.

There is, in fact, some indication that in transforming the term *concordantia* in the manner he did – from canonistic to more deeply theological -- Nicholas was, deliberately or not, drawing on another, older application of the word *concordantia*. This usage, deriving perhaps from Augustine, was a specifically *hermeneutical* one, that attempted to explain how the Old and New Testaments related to one another – in the harmony of “concord”, of course. But the term indicated also the hermeneutical *task* of the reader and Church of actively working to discern and explicate this harmony. (See Paul Spilsbury’s unpublished dissertation, “*The Concordance of Scripture: the homiletic and exegetical methods of St. Anthony of Padua*”, available online at [www.franciscan-archive.org](http://www.franciscan-archive.org), esp. ch. V.) The use of “concordances” to the Bible arises derivatively from this basic principle, for the purpose, originally, of collating the various words and their occurrences was to further the *concordant* reading of the two Testaments. This Scriptural application of the term *concordantia* has been traced from Augustine through Gregory the Great, and, interestingly, up to and through the prophetic coordinating of texts performed by Joachim of Fiore, and the Franciscan spiritual preaching of that great, though now unread, “Doctor of the Church”, Anthony of Padua. Even Nicholas, at the opening of his work (I.3), explains this form of *concordantia* when he outlines how the “oneness” and “unity” of the Church in Christ, as His body, extends throughout time, from the beginning of creation to its fulfillment in the beatific vision, and is “explicated” in history through the discerned correlations of Old Testament and New Testament revelations of Christ as the sole Way and Truth. The various sacrifices of the Old Testament, for example, are visions of the same and the One Christ, though according to the character of the time, for that One Christ holds to Himself the One

Church. Nicholas even defines “faith” as the act of this discernment of Christ’s oneness through Old and New together.

I shall return to this traditional understanding of *concordantia* in a moment. But let me simply state up front here that the political dimensions of “taking counsel” – both in terms of who makes decisions and how decisions are arrived at – have, despite the focus of recent historical interest in conciliarism, always been rooted in a larger theological reality: a vision of how *God* takes particular and discrete realities, determined by separate temporal spaces and forms, *and draws them together into the resolution of His one purpose*. And the Scriptural concerns of “one-mindedness”, understood either as “thinking the same thing” or “having one’s heart in the same place” (*homophronesis* or *homothumadon*), have in the same way, always been linked with a profound vision of the nature of life and time in Christ, such that St. Paul can speak, famously, of “being of one mind”, etc., as somehow essentially bound to “having the same mind” as we are given “in Christ”, *His* mind, which is that of self-humbling, emptying, obedience, death, and exaltation over all things (Phil. 2:1-11). It is “Christ’s mind” that brings all things together through His mission and ministry as Incarnate in time, and this is to be the “mind” of the Church as His body. Although, therefore, much conciliarist writing from the 14<sup>th</sup> through the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries is fraught with (and does so with increasing focus) political concerns and arguments over legal precedents within the history of the Church’s juridical actions, we must not forget that, fueling these arguments, is usually an underlying dynamic of the Christian life as Christ himself moves us through His Spirit (Gerson, especially, has his own take on this: see the work of Mark Burrows). And someone like Cusa sought to bring to bear his vast canonical understanding of a particular issue – council and pope – in a theological context that was indebted to a Scriptural framework.

For most fundamentally, *concordantia* has always been a pneumatic action, the work of the Holy Spirit as it engages and forms the life of Church in a particular and crucial way. If one looks at Jesus’ remarks in John 14, one sees the dynamic movement of this “gathering” together clearly: “Jesus replied, ‘If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me. All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you’” (Jn. 13:23-26, NIV). Here, “keeping” Jesus words is drawn into a movement that embodies love as a kind of “living together”, a shared “home”; but this very movement is subsumed into the common act of “remembering” Jesus’ words themselves. The early Church surely expressed this quite deliberately, when Luke describes the so-called Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 as a Scripture-discerning gathering, but one that is marked clearly by the pneumatic character of its common life in Jerusalem, which Luke has been at pains early in the book to describe and emphasize. That is to say, something like Acts 15 cannot be read properly unless it is linked to Acts 2:42 and 4:32 and 5:42, with their presentation of common life as prayer, worship, apostolic teaching, and material sharing. Council does not take place in a vacuum apart from existing common life and commitments and practices, nor does it lead to a further vacuum of such life, as if the sole purpose of conciliar existence is to make a decision, clear up a problem, and then go home and get back to business..

#### *d. Conciliar Life as Concordantia*

It is my goal now to suggest in outline a way of looking at the Church's life "in council" *theologically* that takes seriously this context of common life with and within the Scriptures, as a perspective upon Anglicanism's particular life and vocation. That life and vocation I will look at in my second talk. For now, I want to step aside from the question of conciliarism's *historical* development, influence, and energies – a question that is necessarily political in nature -- and rather propose a constructive description of conciliarism's intrinsic power within the economy of God. This will be a brief "theoretical" discussion, in the orthodox sense of a prayerful discernment and vision. And to do this, I want to turn to the alternative stream of usage to which the term *concordantia* was placed within the Western tradition, that is, as a means of explicating the character of the Scriptures themselves.

It is to Gregory the Great I want us to turn in this exercise, because he forms a kind of exemplary basis upon which the Church of the West grew in its understanding of "one-mindedness" out of a notion of how God works in the world. Gregory, of course does not make use of the term *concordantia* in the canonistic-legal sense that Nicholas did, for the whole canonical and formally jurisprudential category of ecclesial existence had not yet developed in his era. Nor does he use the term directly to elaborate Augustine's notion of Scriptural cohesion and integration within the context from which I will be drawing now. But the Augustinian thrust of this vision of Scripture is something Gregory does in fact, and carefully so, take up; and it is interesting that its fruit, as he sees it, is the *concordia*, the unity and peace of the people of God themselves. (*Concordia*, a common Latin word, was the term used by conciliarists like Conrad.) "Nothing without concord is pleasing to the Lord [...] He does not consent to receive the sacrifice from disputants [...] therefore ponder this, how great is the sin of discord because that whereby guilt is unloosed is cast aside [and] truly the elect are always joined in charity, [the] same charity [that] gives back the sound of praise to their Author" (*Homilies on Ezekiel*, 8.9). For "without concord, no other virtue is a virtue at all" (8:8).

Gregory writes these sentences, which refer directly to the teaching of Jesus on not leaving your gift at the altar if you are not reconciled to your brother (Mat. 5:23-25), as the summation to his long discussion on Ezekiel 1, which make up the first 8 of his surviving *Homilies on Ezekiel*. He is talking about Ez. 1:24, which describes, in the vision of the Four Creatures, how when they move, their wings make a sound like "the sound of many waters", like God's own voice, like an army on the march. This, he concludes, is the sound of *concordia*, the aural sign of charity as it overcomes the sin of the world through time, the Church working through its unity in love as the victor over every evil. But this summation, as I said, comes at the end of his long discussion of the vision of the Creatures themselves – their faces, their wings, their feet, their forms, their torches, and their wheels. And in all this, Gregory deploys one of the great figuralist readings of Scripture on record, by which the fullness of the divine plan is uncovered within the small scope of just a few verses. And the result is that, what Gregory concludes to be the *concordia* of the Church, its one-mindedness in a Pauline sense, is given and emerges only through an underlying dynamic of the Gospel's work, via the Spirit in the world, that takes in the fullness of the Word made flesh and revealed to creation.

If we peruse *Homilies* 6 through 8, we learn this in detail. Who are the Four Creatures? They are the Four Gospels and the Four Evangelists – yes, but not simply and woodenly: they are the Gospel and the Gospel’s servants as the Word himself comes into the world He has conceived from before time; they are the mission of the Son as the Son takes time into His own hands and touches it with His own being and enters it. Hence, they are also the Law and the Prophets, the Word “going forth”, and they represent too the “preachers of the Word” within the post-apostolic times, the Church herself, as she carries God’s truth into all the corners of the world. They are the *whole* Word of God in time, from Adam to Heaven, comprehending Israel and the Church together. This is what Ezekiel sees. And next to the Creatures are the wheels, each with a wheel within it. Congruent with the Four Living Creatures, these represent the Word of God as it is articulated specifically, the New Testament “wheel” within the Old Testament, each coordinated with the other. But, as Ezekiel writes, the wheels “move”, and “when the living creatures went, the wheels went beside them; and when the living creatures rose from the earth, the wheels rose; and wherever the spirit would go, they went, and wheels rose along with them; for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels” (Ez.1:19-20). The Scriptures, that is, as Gregory explains, display their coordination through the work of the Church in history, moving, stopping, rising, and lowering as the Church’s word is carried in this or that situation. Furthermore, Gregory says, the movement of the wheels indicates their integrated approach to the various times and capacities of both congregation and individual, the “Spirit” being both the spirit of God and the spirit of the Church: the Word is heard as it is able to be heard, for it approaches and leads at the same time. And God orders the history of the Church according to the history of the work of the Creatures and their Wheels.

It is only as a conclusion and summation, as I said, that Gregory then dwells upon the *concordia* of the Church itself. For the Church reflects the concordant mission of the Spirit – whom Gregory alternates with the Word, in a bit of economic, though historically accurate, confusion -- through the Scriptures. The Church’s life in charity – a dynamic reality -- is of a piece with the way the one Word is spoken and received by Israel and the Gentiles; her love is at one with the integrated and correlated movement of Old and New Testament in the lives and minds of the faithful.

From Gregory’s standpoint, the *concordantia* that Nicholas’ conciliar vision instantiates, has to do quite concretely with the relationship of the Church to the Scriptures as they are articulated, proclaimed, received, and understood in time; and, conversely, it is this proclamation and reception that form the Church through the mission of Scriptural impulse and our subjection to it. And Gregory’s placement of *concordia* as the fruit of the Spirit’s Scriptural mission across the history of the Testaments provides several specific elements to a conciliar vision that are not immediately apparent when that vision is approached primarily in terms of juridical and (as the vision developed and continues to find applicability today) specifically *jurisdictional* categories.

It is in this light that I wish now to offer a constructive outline to conciliar life, and with this outline I will close my talk so that we can move to the concrete life of our Anglican church and Communion with these tools ready at hand.

First of all, the concord of council is an outworking or embodiment even, of a sort, of the work of the Word of God, given in the Two Testaments, as it extends itself into the world. Council is

about how the *Scriptures* are powerful, and therefore the Scriptures are always the first and last and fundamental subject of conciliar action, as it seeks to comprehend, within a particular context and perhaps with regard to a particular issue, the way in which the Bible offers an integrated grasp of these matters, Old and New together. This may seem an unduly constrictive and biblicist way of defining the foundation of conciliar life. However, it will seem so only if one fails to grasp the *historical* character of the Scriptures' power over the Church, which constitutes the work of the Holy Spirit. And think of the difference it would make in our present Anglican circumstances if this were accepted and enacted seriously!

Second, and because of this first point, the concord of council is a temporally extended reality: just as the correlation of the Testaments is discovered through the outworking of history, since their form actually constitutes that outworking of the one Word in time, so a council discovers its resolution in charity only over time as it is able in fact to study the Scriptures together in a way demanded by their divine and infinitely variegated and profound character. We know that the first two ecumenical councils took place over 2 months apiece, for instance; and, in the face of the intractibilities of schism and the rest, the famous Council of Constance over 3 and half years. Times and technological and cultural demands and opportunities have changed, of course; although the Second Vatican Council, though obviously not meeting during the entire time, spread itself out over 3 years. And whatever the improvements in alternative forms of consultation in our contemporary and electronically network-wired world, there is a likelihood here that irresolution in council is directly related to the limiting of counsel's temporal extent.

For, third, the concord of council seems to be expressed, not only through the extent of her engagement, but through the ongoing progress of her repetition. (This point was emphasized in the Council of Constance's second famous decree, *Frequens*.) For Gregory, the discernment of God's *concordantia*, in Scriptural terms, is a deepening reality – hence the wheels of the Testaments move, and move to and with and beyond the readers and Church at all times, leading them forward through her purpose. If there is progress in the discernment and knowledge of Scripture, it is only because council must lead to further council, in order that the *Scriptures* themselves are learned and deepened. In this sense, the conciliar vision is one that cannot ever see counsel itself as *ad hoc*, but always as *regular* and disciplined in its regularity. Councils may indeed serve *ad hoc* needs – indeed, their *work* is perhaps always formed by such needs. But their work is not the same as their nature and character, which is regular and consistent. To let council drop or to refuse attendance is to consign the Scriptures to a purely functional instrumentality based upon autonomously described demands, when they are in fact the inventors of our needs.

It is this initiating quality of the Scriptures read in council that leads to the fourth point of my constructed conciliarism, based on Gregory: that is, its missionary dynamism. The Creatures and the Wheels are in movement; but that is because the Word is sharing itself through the world and time, gathering prophets and apostles, and making time itself the act of preaching or proclamation. The mark of a true council, then – its *concordantia* – will be a charity that is outgoing, and that shares the Gospel more widely. Councils therefore are intrinsically the instruments of “renewal” and can be evaluated on this basis.

Related to this, finally, is Gregory's insistence that the movement of the Creatures and their Wheels through time – the power of reading and discerning the Scriptures in concord – reorients and nourishes all the “virtues” of the Christian calling, for this kind of Scriptural counsel must necessarily sanctify. While I did not mention this directly in my summary earlier, we can see why this is so: *concordantia* as it is established through the discipline of Scriptural counsel together, will lead to self-knowledge, to repentance, and finally to the reconciliation between brothers and sisters that, as Gregory points out in his example of Jesus' teaching on not offering a gift at the altar while in a state of discord. Such *concordia* is the foundation of the Church's ability to survive in time. Sanctification, in fact, is simply a name for what is happening when the Church subjects herself, in her members, to the Scriptural power of repentance and forgiveness. It is not, however, a completed process in this life, and hence Gregory's vision of concord maintains its peregrinating character, the incessant movement of the Word of God as it takes all things to itself, embracing the old and the new in a single, though temporally extended, grasp.

I have dubbed this discipline of Scriptural counsel as “wheels within wheels”, in deference to Gregory's description of the power of the Word to bring concord to bear as the Church's face within the world. Of course, the phrase “wheels within wheels” has, since at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century, taken on an increasingly negative sense: from something that was simply “mysterious”, the phrase has sometimes been used as an indication of something unnecessarily complicated. In a way, Nicholas would embrace this understanding: councils are part of the great and divine “explication” of what is “complicated” in creation. But Gregory's exegesis rightly emphasizes the dynamic character of coordination that the Scriptures not only demand, but embody through the power of the Spirit. And the disciplined subjection to this power, as a church, is what a council, and its repeated formation of the Church, entail. “Complicated”, yes; but only because it forms the shape of the Church's long and rich history. Both in terms of the negative and positive aspects of this way of looking at council, Anglicanism has a special place and set of challenges today. To this we will turn in our second talk.

## II. Anglicanism and the Search for Christian Concord

In my first talk, I chose to use the prophetic phrase “wheels within wheels” to describe the nature of conciliar life, of “taking counsel” within the Church. The phrase, from Ezekiel’s vision, is one I borrowed mostly from Gregory the Great’s reflection on the work of God in time via the power of Scripture’s comprehensive testamental reach in and through the Church. Applying it to the conciliar life, I proposed that, with Gregory’s specific definitions in mind, this phrase provides an accurate sense of the way many councils work in time, engaged by and with the Scripture, to move together and lead the Church within God’s transformative purpose. The theological character of council, I argued, derives from this kind of vision: council is the punctuated means by which one-mindedness and one-spiritedness – *concordia* or *concordantia* in conciliar language -- take shape, through a calling, a gathering, a Scriptural deliberation, a transformation finally of the heart.

Now I would like to turn our attention more specifically to our Anglican heritage and situation, in light of the conciliar calling, as I have outlined it. And we might well wonder, in light of what was said yesterday, how this larger picture of conciliarism does or does not “fit” our life as Anglicans both locally and more broadly. It is both the question of “fit” and of “will” that we need to assess. I earlier mentioned Paul Avis, whose recent book on conciliarism entitled *Beyond the Reformation?* bears reading. Avis, a long-time student of ecumenical theology and ecclesiology, is the head of the Church of England’s “Council for Christian Unity”. He introduces his book with a comment on Anglicanism’s unique “conciliar principles and structures”, as says that Anglicans have been “pioneers” of episcopal government in synod. But he then raises the question that has haunted conciliarism from the beginning: is it up to the job? Noting our present circumstances, Avis calls Gene Robinson’s consecration in 2003 a “brutal and unavoidable new fact in the Anglican ecclesiastical landscape”. And he goes on to say: “It is because that consecration or ordination was, like all ordinations, a sacramental act, an ecclesial sign with universal intention, of what is true of the Church and of the values that the Church stands for and of the message that it proclaims, that at the time of writing it has placed a question mark over the viability of Anglican polity and the cohesion of the Anglican Communion. In that sense, it was parallel to the event that sparked the greatest trauma ever to afflict the Western Church before the Reformation itself: the election, in 1378 of two popes (subsequently enlarged to three) who reigned simultaneously, each claiming the allegiance of Christendom and roundly anathematizing the other(s). The sets of responses that have been offered to these two events (so widely separated in time that it seems to be a painful effort for some otherwise educated Christians to discern any connection or analogy between them [...]) bear an uncanny resemblance to each other” (p. xv). Indeed: and does Council of Constance’s rapid loss of focus, and the Church quick movement back from council to pope, and finally into Reformation division, presage some new and analogous disintegration in our midst today?

But the analogy would bear scrutiny only if Anglicanism itself could claim for itself some original and ongoing conciliar ordering. Can it?

It is true that representatives of the English church were not themselves very active at the actual gatherings of Constance and Basle, nor had they offered much to the debate itself. But they were

not without interest in these councils, and by Henry VIII's reign, there were many in England who had imbibed the conciliar teaching of the Continent. As the struggle between monarch and papacy unfolded in the 1530's, entangled as it was already with growing calls for ecclesial and theological reform, Henry and his counselors drew on conciliar arguments to appeal his case to a larger gathering, that is, to a "General Council". Various churchmen, earlier and later, were active in this attempt and in the wider discussions of council that it engendered – Edward Fox, Cuthbert Tunstall, Thomas Starkey, and even Stephen Gardiner and Thomas More – these were all "catholics" in certain key respects, and some of them even later suffered for their refusal to embrace fully the reforms of Henry or Edward or Elizabeth; but their willingness to engage the question of the papacy's limited powers, to different extents, and the council's relation to it and to the secular monarch, makes them all "conciliarist" in a fundamental way. Each was able to raise the question and sympathetically analyze the arguments on constraining the pope's authority, and ordering the church by more general realities of "consent" according, in this case, to the national identity and its representatives (including the monarch, of course, as responsible for the imposition of divine and natural law). And, in a kind of theoretical way, these discussions laid a seed for later constitutional concerns. Behind many of their ideas, lay Jean Gerson's writing, and its dissemination through various theological routes.

In point of fact, however, this broad conciliarism was quickly diluted by the larger needs and demands for decision-making within this era, and the theological substance of the debate – broad enough to engage anonymous writing and publishing – was soon set aside. We know that Cranmer, both early but also at the very end of his life, sought the authority of a General Council to bring order to the increasingly anarchic situation of ecclesial and political life in England and Europe, but this desire was hardly at the center of his more consistent vision

The famous Reformed English statements on councils, e.g. in Article XXI in the Articles of Religion (which date in the Latin version from 1563), seem to relegate their status. First, they make the convening of councils a matter of the "prince's will"; second, they affirm councils' potential for "error", even in essential matters pertaining to the faith; finally, they subject councils stringently to the higher and ultimate authority of Scripture. But rather than marginalize councils, this constraining of their authority proved, at least in the minds of many Anglican reformers, rather to indicate the shape of their necessary application. Thus, Cranmer's own appeal to a Council, as we mentioned; but also people like Jewel's published desire that "God grant that we may once see that day that a General Council may be called, wherein Christ may sit president, and all these matters that are now in question may have indifferent hearing, and may be decided by the word of God" (cited in Avis, p. 139, with other refs.). The point here is that councils do their work only as Scripture remains their key, and gatherings are oriented primarily to the vocation of scriptural engagement. Hence, William Whitaker, the great – indeed, normative -- Elizabethan expositor of Protestant Anglican Scriptural hermeneutics, insisted that "we allow that it is a highly convenient way of finding the true sense of Scripture for devout and learned men to assemble, examine the cause diligently, and investigate the truth; yet with this proviso, that they govern their decision wholly by the Scriptures [...] such a proceeding we, for our parts, have long wished for" (cited in Avis, p. 139).

By the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, conciliar ideas returned to the English theological and political arena, as controversy with Roman Catholics and then with more radical Protestants demanded more acute

and subtle historical argument. (Cf. John Ponet and Matthew Sutcliffe.) In addition, popular works like Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* (orig. 1563) presented the Conciliar period, especially Constance, Basle, and Pisa, as the dawn of the Reformation itself, and the period and its characters took on a new luster. Scholars like Patterson and Avis consider Richard Hooker, within this new stream of interest in councils, to be among the most robust and rich Anglican explicator of conciliar ideals. But that is not because Hooker devotes much explicit space to councils, let alone to their peculiar place within the Church of England. He does not. But in the *Laws* he focuses so forcefully upon notions of law and consent – and Hooker was well versed in the constitutional concerns of late 16<sup>th</sup> century England – that the essential character of conciliar action hovers behind much of what he argues with respect to the Church's proper self-ordering. Law and consent, as Hooker presents these two categories, are things got at relationally, socially, via corporate discernment and ordered decision-making, within the proper outworking of the law of nature and of social bodies, and according to the particular directives of God's supernaturally revealed will. It is not surprising, then, that when Hooker does mention church councils, he has both a very high view of their need and authority, but also a realistic one of their relative historical place within the scope of God's purposes.

Most famously, Hooker compares the General Council, and church councils more broadly, to the natural – that is divinely originated – emergence of laws among the Christian nations. “Communion”, literally, is his theme, and it derives from the reality that “there is one Lord, one faith, and one baptism”. In this context, councils are “a thing whereof God's own blessed Spirit was the author; a thing practised by the holy Apostles themselves; a thing always afterward kept and observed throughout the world; a thing never otherwise than most highly esteemed of, till pride, ambition and tyranny began by fractious and vile endeavours to abuse that divine intention unto the furtherance of wicked purposes”. But *abusus non tollit usum* – wrong use does not preclude proper use -- and Hooker insists that councils and the laws by which they order the Church must be revived and continue (*Laws*, I.10.14).

So, for instance, he continues to describe the Church's “general council” as “the best, the safest, the most sincere and reasonable way” of deciding controverted matters authoritatively – well nigh equal to “apostolic” injunctions in their weight, if rendered as a “verdict” taken from an “orderly” ecclesial gathering (*Laws* IV.13). But the context of these kinds of remarks by Hooker is invariably that of ecclesial turmoil – such as the Puritans are engendering – and the “peace” of the Church becomes an overriding goal that imbues a legitimate council with its power over and beyond the actual content of its decisions. Councils may indeed “err”, as the Anglican Articles of Religion had insisted. That is not in dispute. But their authority is near apostolical, not in because of this content – that may be erroneous – but because of its goal, the peace of the church and society, and its “sincere” commitment to engage the truth of God's will that must, if pursued over time, finally provide the Church with the correctives its decisions may require. Personal or minority resistance to the decisions of lawful Church councils, even if in fact they prove erroneous, is not a faithful response, precisely because it rejects the Christian calling to conciliar engagement and the promise of divine ordering to which it is fundamentally subject. Thus, in his Preface, Hooker lays out this rather extreme claim as a basic commitment when he writes, as against Puritan calls to ecclesial resistance because of purported ecclesial error: “howbeit, better it was in the eye of [God's] understanding that sometimes an erroneous sentence definitive should prevail, till the same authority perceiving such oversight, might

afterwards correct or reverse it, than that strifes should have respite to grow, and not come speedily unto some end” (Preface, 6).

And this claim Hooker extends, not just to “General Councils” but to all politically legitimate representative bodies charged with making “judicial” and “final” decisions, even to secular “commissions” granted authority in these matters. These must stand over and against all individual judgment that leads to the overturning of corporate peace. Hooker – out-Puritaning the Puritans in this case – cites Deuteronomy 17:12 on this score: “And the man that will do presumptuously, and will not hearken unto the priest that standeth to minister there before the LORD thy God, or unto the judge, even that man shall die: and thou shalt put away the evil from Israel.” And all this is because the character of all “law” functions, as a gift from and reflection of God, via a network of communal relations of discernment and judgment for the sake of truth and peace together over time. “Conciliar life”, we could say, derives from the very nature of created human communities of all and any kind; and church councils from the nature of God’s ordering of the Christian community as it is engaged in discerning God’s will, most centrally within the Scriptures. Within this process – that is, within this history of God’s creative ordering – the Church, bit by bit, follows her pilgrimage through a common settlement of purpose that consistently reflects the “weightier” matters of the law – mercy and justice – as Hooker quotes Matthew 23:23), and as the Body of Christ orders herself in peace as she seeks the understanding of the Kingdom. (Cf. esp. Bk. VIII.6, *passim*).

Hooker’s remarks are brief, yet within the context of his own concerns and even the immediate focus of his writings, they are significant in their regrasping, politically, of *concordantia* as I have outlined it. After all, what Hooker is ostensibly analyzing is the nature of Scriptural authority within a community that must make decisions in the face of various and varying demands, that affect, in various ways, the range of members within that community. It is understanding the character of Law – divine, natural, communal, supernatural, and so on, and their relationship to one another – that allows one – so Hooker argues – to navigate these decisions. And this is precisely a matter of discernment, not of simple calculus according to some set of formulae. God is indeed ordering the world through time, according to the larger order of His purpose – and churches must exist in “history”, argues Hooker, which means they must find their own order within this. And Scripture has a unique place in this ordering, because it both reveals aspects of it specifically, but also because Scripture acts as a kind of shadow to the more fundamental order of God’s purpose as it is being played out in the whole network of divine law within human society. Hence, Scripture does *not*, as Hooker insists versus the Puritans, explicitly tell us everything that is true. But it *does* “reflect” everything that is true, even the shifts of historical experience and understanding. This takes place, as much of Hooker’s own discussions demonstrate, through the interplay of the Testaments themselves, as they are bound to the shape of human communities, Jewish, Christian, and even pagan.

If we are to sort any of this out – and we must, as Hooker himself recognizes in even writing his book in the first place, in response to the turmoil of the Church in England – we can only do this through the careful and common discernment of Scriptural law as it takes its living form within the community. This is exactly why “council” is both natural and necessary from Hooker’s standpoint, even when that council presents itself in the simple forms of political arrangements. And, in a sense, his own work is a part of this “conciliar” process, that must include open debate,

but also careful and extended study, analysis, and communal evaluation. Actual church councils, formed through the coming together of representatives acting according to specific forms of discussion and decision, are but the particular sign of this larger conciliar action in which, dare I say, public theology, oriented towards Scriptural reading and interpretation in its comprehensive scope and social context, is a key element.

This may seem more than a little ideal. And it is. But it is an ideal that has attracted the attention of many. In 1998 Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission published their report on *The Gift of Authority*, which sought to lay out an agreed statement on how the Church's exercise of authority flows from the acceptance of the truth of God's commitments in Christ Jesus, the "Amen" to all God's promises (2 Cor. 1:20). The way the Church does this is through its common faithfulness and subjection to the teaching tradition of her apostolic life. And one long section of the Report (34-40) is devoted specifically to the reality of "synodality", "the walking together" or "common way" that is given, first in the Eucharist, and then extends through joint representative counsel, especially within the office of the bishops and, where necessary, extending outward to broader and larger councils, which are received by the faithful. Anglicans and Roman Catholics together are committed to this, the Report insists. The entire section is an important one to read, in order to get a grasp of a major contemporary perspective on living conciliarism. But the paragraph (39) on Anglican conciliarism is worth quoting now in full:

*"In the Church of England at the time of the English Reformation the tradition of synodality was expressed through the use both of synods (of bishops and clergy) and of Parliament (including bishops and lay people) for the settlement of liturgy, doctrine and church order. The authority of General Councils was also recognised. In the Anglican Communion, new forms of synods came into being during the nineteenth century and the role of the laity in decision making has increased since that time. Although bishops, clergy, and lay persons consult with each other and legislate together, the responsibility of the bishops remains distinct and crucial. In every part of the Anglican Communion, the bishops bear a unique responsibility of oversight. For example, a diocesan synod can be called only by the bishop, and its decisions can stand only with the bishop's consent. At provincial or national levels, Houses of Bishops exercise a distinctive and unique ministry in relation to matters of doctrine, worship and moral life. Further, though Anglican synods largely use parliamentary procedures, their nature is eucharistic. This is why the bishop as president of the Eucharist appropriately presides at the diocesan synod, which assembles to bring God's redemptive work into the present through the life and activity of the local church. Furthermore, each bishop has not only the episcopate of the local church but participates in the care of all the churches. This is exercised within each province of the Anglican Communion with the help of organs such as Houses of Bishops and the Provincial and General Synods. In the Anglican Communion as a whole the Primates' Meeting, the Anglican Consultative Council, the Lambeth Conference and the Archbishop of Canterbury serve as instruments of synodality."*

I'm afraid this really *is* an ideal. Not only is the jump from the Reformation to the present Anglican Communion one that masks some rather odd conciliar witness, but we all know too well that the present moment is not one in which this calm paean to Anglican life in council

reflects the spirit of actual dialogue. How, in fact, did and does the conciliar ideal find its form in Anglicanism?

Let us leave aside the debated question of heavy-handed rule, from Canterbury and court, under Abp. Laud and Charles; not to mention the strange contortions of the Parliament over several decades during and after this period. It is arguable that “conciliar life” was embodied during these times; and even if so, hardly in a way that could be judged as furthering *concordantia*. But even after the Restoration, indeed already by 1700, the tenor of debate and relationship between the Lower and Upper houses of Canterbury’s Convocation were so strained that meetings were being held only sporadically. In 1717 this had become so bitter, and the proceedings so scandalous to the larger populace that Convocation was prorogued – discontinued, though without formal dissolution – indefinitely, and apart from certain minor matters, never met again until 1856. This was possible, constitutionally, because of certain complex laws linking Crown and Archbishop; but it hardly represented the church’s “conciliar” functioning through consensual means on behalf of the people. Obviously, Church life went on, and in some areas, blossomed spectacularly from the grass-roots up – the religious societies, Methodism, and so on. Still, “council” more or less disappeared from the Church of England, and the character of Christian life within England, I would argue, suffered deeply as a result.

Ironically, it is in *America*, and in the United States specifically, that the conciliar character of Anglicanism found new and vital form, with the calling of the General Convention in 1785 and 1789, made up finally of a house of bishops and house of deputies including lay representatives, and meeting at regular and constitutionally guaranteed moments. It is probably fair to say that the Episcopal Church’s General Convention – of which it was self-consciously proud and for which it offered numerous apologies based on broad readings of the early Church – exercised more influence than anything else upon the revival and re-invention of conciliarist or synodical life within Anglicanism over the next two centuries. And it is, of course, “ironic” that this is so, given TEC’s recent role in disrupting this development up to the present so thoroughly.

But perhaps not so ironic as all that. For it is also significant that the model for revived conciliarism within the Anglican community came out of a frankly and unabashedly political context – the American Revolution -- where the questions of representation and consent were paramount, and the theological concerns regarding the Body of Christ and the discernment of the Scriptures were at best secondary, if that. It has only been with difficulty that Anglicans have clawed back, as it were, to the presenting issues of conciliarist commitment, which involve the *salus populi Dei in Verbo suo*.

Certainly, the synodical form of government by which churches are ordered through the council of their bishops and other leaders, clergy and lay, has now become normative within Anglicanism. And not without a sense that the character of the Gospel itself impels us to this form. There was a kind of Anglo-Saxon chauvinism, not too pretty to boot, that originally lay behind the floating of a general Anglican council in the 1850’s (from the American side), as a means of extending the triumphant Anglo-Saxon Christian culture to new corners of the earth. But the real impetus for a larger Anglican council, as we know, came from a concrete worry over the Anglican fracture within South Africa, and the ripples of tension it was causing among mutually-recognizing Anglican bodies. When the first Lambeth Conference was in fact

convened in 1867, at the urging of Canadian bishops, it was responding, in part, to a new sense both that the Anglican Church (as opposed to a Church of England with some subsidiaries) was a reality, however ill-defined, and that this reality demanded a certain way of life if it was to maintain its Christian integrity. Obviously, even more than the American General Convention, this Conference marked the first full step towards a larger conciliarist *self-understanding*. And preceding, as it did, the First Vatican Council, its significance for the wider church cannot be overestimated. Even if Scripture itself was only very indirectly involved – its interpretation and authority lay, after all, behind the divisions in South Africa that Lambeth would try to sort out – the dynamic of *gathering* because of the Scriptures was now officially, as it were, reinstated.

And the first Lambeth acted as a synod, despite the clear statements beforehand that sought to limit the gathering's scope of authority: it sought to bring order into Natal (cf. Res. 6 and 7); it claimed the right to judge the character of various provincial Books of Common Prayer, through a declaration regarding the right of synods to revise the Prayer Books of member provinces (res. 8); and it sought the organization of a "doctrinal tribunal" for "appeal" – although the Conference carefully called it a "voluntary spiritual tribunal" – whose work, nonetheless, was aimed at the heart of the disputative character of the churches (Res. 9). And nothing could be more synodically "definitive" than the issuance, at the 1888 Conference (Resolution 11) of the so-called Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, that, although couched only in terms of an "opinion" of the Conference, has quickly become a touchstone for Anglican self-understanding not only across the globe, but within the eyes of most other churches.

It is true that there was a steadfast rejection of formal "synodality" by the Conference, and the 1930 Conference (Res. 33) was adamant that it had not "been summoned as a synod to issue any statement professing to define doctrine". Furthermore, the Conference (Res. 49) insisted that the churches of the Communion "are bound together not by a central legislative and executive authority, but by mutual loyalty sustained through the common counsel of the bishops in conference". On this basis, the Conference also rejected the recommendation of the first Lambeth gathering that an "appellate tribunal" be set up, as something "inconsistent with the spirit of the Anglican Communion" (Res. 51). This, even as the Conference began to argue that "unity in faith and discipline" depended on the "subordination" of lesser synods to greater ones (1867.4) and that interdependence demanded that larger bodies within the Communion should take responsibility for common concerns (the so-called "Lund Principle" – cf. 1968.44 and 1988.14). Furthermore, what exactly is "common counsel of bishops in conference", if not a synod?

It was almost as if the Lambeth conferences were deliberately kicking against the pricks. "No, we are *not* a council!", they said stamping a bit their foot. (And the foot-stamping still goes on.) But for all that, Lambeth's stature, at least in the public and ecumenical perception, grew during all this time. One reason was the general renewal of awareness in conciliar ideals as the World Council of Churches took its form in 1948, after the moral and ecclesial debacle of World War II, and the failure of previous "conciliar" practice had risen to the level of blatant ethical scandal. People were looking to Lambeth not simply as a living example of some alternative, but as a place where that alternative, if not yet truly visible, could in fact be tested and given flesh.

But it was probably the *ressourcement* associated with the ecumenical Liturgical Movement that did more to reorient this set of political concerns, as they converged towards renewing council, in a specific direction: that is, towards the reality of not only re-appropriating Scripture as a central facet of taking council, but actually making that Scriptural focus the very purpose of council altogether. This took place in the wake of a growing interest, from the 1920's on, but especially in the 1950's, in restoring patristic understandings and experiences of a common baptism and eucharist, for instance. As this interest came together with a new ecumenical focus upon biblical theology, which drew various traditions together (including newly oriented Roman Catholic Scriptural studies), the new orientation blossomed. The result offered a new common ground in the appreciation synodical (and especially episcopally synodical) council. In this context, for instance, the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral gained a new profile and standing: Scripture before Creed, upheld by sacrament and episcopacy, and granted historical shaping in the context of local life. Conciliar life, even if the phrase was not used, had at least a living conceptual model.

With the emergence at the same time, in the 1950's and 1960's of newly independent younger churches, in Africa and Asia, Anglicanism was poised to present itself in a new form, as a restored conciliarist body, a Communion of churches bound by deep Scriptural roots of Reformation and Catholic concern, and representing, more perhaps than any other church, the shape of the primitive ecclesial ideal. And this new profile was not simply a pretence, although it was historically a kind of novelty: there was a sense that this is what Anglicanism had been leading towards, in all of its fits and starts, from the beginning. So much so that other churches accepted the new image readily and genuinely, as we see with the recent ARCIC statement. The ideal had become a living hope, because it was tasting the breath of life through its enactment. The younger churches, many engaged in what appeared (and not only romantically) to be a reconnection with the thrill of the Primitive Church's evangelical ardor both Scripturally and evangelistically, were bringing to the staid structures of the Communion's gatherings a sense of divine vitality and raw power. Once again, taking place in tandem with a large Roman Catholic council, Vatican II, that now turned to the Scriptures as its own foundation of ordering truth, the conciliarist vision seemed about to bloom. *Salus populi lex suprema esto* would indeed now take the form of an Anglican – and perhaps even ecumenical -- commitment to let the Scriptures form the people of God freely yet consistently. And decision-making would be on this basis and would actually embody its reality.

If I am sounding a bit wistful here, there is an obvious reason: the promise was never much more than a hope, and is in any case – and almost from the moment of its birth -- under threat in a great way. It was not a vain promise, to be sure. Despite accusations about the horrendous ordering of Lambeth 1998, for instance, there were aspects of its form that marked a serious progress within this conciliar promise, and that is primarily the attempt at and exercise of extended Bible studies among the bishops, so that discussion and finally decision could indeed be made “according to the Scriptures”. I have talked to numerous bishops who were present at that Conference who spoke of the remarkable grace of this single, and simple commitment to pursue *concordantia* in the way I have defined it within the Christian tradition. But Lambeth 1998 also exposed the weakness of *actual* conciliar practice within the Communion. The Bible studies proved a kind of passing technique, brief and faltering, and unrelated to many of the actual issues under discussion for action, that collapsed under the weight of a long-brewing

conflict that had never found an extended context for its confrontation, engagement, and definitive resolution. We all know that the 1998 Lambeth Conference was plagued with bluster, sudden shifts of parliamentary maneuver, and finally recriminating debate over the “one-mindedness” of its actual decisions. Certainly, once adjourned, the Conference sent back into the world, not a group of renewed and re-focused bishops, but a group of seemingly angered and hostile parties, chained to the politics of local image and personal gain. So that, just as some tentative steps were being taken, it seemed, to embrace the conciliar call, its infant weakness proved incapable to sustaining the burden of an adult conflict laid upon it.

The fact that the next robust attempt at conciliar commitment by the Communion, engineered mainly through the leadership of the Archbishop of Canterbury – the proposed Anglican Covenant – has now become hostage (and fatally so perhaps) to the refusals to exercise discipline on organizing council (on the part of Canterbury), self-discipline by TEC as being essentially a part of a council, or *self-giving* for the sake of council (on the part of the Global South Primates) is but a sign of the still-incomplete acceptance of the conciliar vision by Anglicans world-wide. The recent statement by the Archbishop of Sydney that Lambeth is basically dead, and that such gatherings are now something of the past; coupled with the Archbishop of Canterbury’s earlier claim, in his invitations to Lambeth, that it is *not* a “synod” in any case – as if to say, “don’t worry, we won’t deal with anything that will change us in the face of our present failures” -- represents a general exhaustion, but also weakness in the face of a true spiritual challenge. It all seems too hard.

For if council is to make sense, it must be given time, it must be given the means to progress, to engage the sharing of the Word, to reach outwards, to be judged by the power of its holiness, and finally to result in the change that the Word’s encounter, in its comprehensive grasp, must accomplish. And it is not as if there is ignorance about or rejection of this vision of council. The Windsor Report, I would argue, provides a concrete (if not always clear and admittedly sometimes lurching) articulation of it in its essential linkage of interdependent communion and the life of Scriptural engagement through the collegial and episcopally-led discernment of the synods of the Church. And the Archbishop of Canterbury, for all the invective aimed at him, has consistently pressed for a church and Communion where the Scriptures are read “eucharistically”, that is, explicitly through and within the gathered community’s subjection to the Holy Spirit’s listening gifts and transformative power to empty us into Christ’s own self-emptying grace. Indeed, these were points that he made here during his visit to Wycliffe and Trinity only 6 months ago.

Yet you and I can easily list the failures in taking hold of this vision, I am afraid, over the past few years: “inter-Anglican” commissions that meet, and in their haste and accepted “distance discussion” come up with nothing but vacuous statements acknowledging “difference”, as if their job was to be sociologists of diversity, not seekers of concord; diocesan, episcopal, and provincial synods that are littered with menu items, resolutions, advocacy agenda, unwieldy participations, and compressed political posturing at microphones, such that prayerful study and discernment are not only impossible but actually unwelcome and sometimes even ruled illegitimate; Primates’ meetings that, although coming out with relatively clear directives, are so driven by constrained scheduling and the pressures of the media, as well as personal grand-standing and political maneuver, that the ability to read the Scripture together, to study it, to

dwell with it, to work with it and be worked over by it, has never even been broached. The failures are legion, and they center mainly around the reading of Scripture together, progressively, pneumatically, and submissively. What we have seen, over the past few years, even as the promise of conciliarism was made with alluring hope, is, in expressed response, a great *fear* of council, which evidences a fear of God's own power and judgment. What, after all, are we to make of claims by Lambeth to lack of money to meet or to have the Primates meet, or claims by other Primates and bishops to their inability to sit in the same room as heretics, to being manipulated by external powers (Anglican Communion office, Primates and their cronies)? To refusals to grant representative status to bishops, the most venerable representatives of the people the Church has ever had? It is as if, having revived the conciliar ideal at last, Anglicanism has beaten a retreat into its most craven political understandings, so as to avoid God's own presence. I cannot criticize too strongly those on Right and Left for this cowardice, from Lambeth to Lagos to 815 to Sydney to Cardiff. Hooker's lament over the decline of council, because of "pride, ambition and tyranny" linked to "fractious and vile endeavours" rings ever loudly in our midst. If we will not take the time and spend the money and adopt the expectant attitude to come together before the living Word of God, who are we, really?

There are a number of aspects of conciliar life that must be rediscovered and reasserted if the present devolution of its promise is to be halted. I will end with this therapeutic survey:

First, we must reaffirm the conciliar imperative itself, and put aside the ever-reiterated fears of stating the synodal character of our gatherings within the Communion. Rather than continually limiting the meaning of every gathering and its work, we should rather embrace the actual conciliar movement that has welled up within the history of Anglicanism itself: Lambeth, for instance, *is* a "synod", a council; so is the meeting of the Primates; so is the ACC; so too are our diocesan synods and the gatherings of clergy or laity who come together to pray and study and form a common mind. The attempt to hedge the import of these meetings is proving, more and more, a Jonah-like flight from the vocation to be gripped by the proffered authority of God's Word. As I have argued before: "Lambeth can be what it wants to be". If she does not wish to be a synod or council, in the simple but fundamental sense I have outlined, that is a stark judgment on her potential participants, and, frankly, a marked rejection of the *salus populi Dei* in this troubling time.

But, of course, that Word must also be acknowledged as being at the heart of council itself. The conciliar life's central purpose of engaging and being engaged by the Scriptures of God in their fullness must reemerge. There are obviously specific pragmatic realities that the councils of Anglicanism must deal with, and do so straightforwardly. But these realities – what to do with TEC or with boundary-crossers or with those congregations fearing destructive oversight from their bishops and so on – have so overwhelmed the possibility of God's confrontation through His Word of the Church of Christ in time that the latter has been rendered irrelevant to the proceedings of gathering altogether. Even in the face of the most concrete problems of common life that need resolution, these must be grappled with only from within the larger scope of the Scriptures' ordering of our lives – and if that takes more time than we desire, it is our desires that must be curtailed, not the power of God's Word.

If this were to be pursued, the new (to Anglicanism, that is, although not to the Church, alas) penchant to threaten or enact boycotts and premature departures and the staying out of rooms because of bad smells, however metaphorized, must also come to an end. Where there is conflict, Paul and Peter must face each other (Gal. 2:11), and say their worst, their most, their deepest convictions; and they must each endure it. Not for a moment only, through the publishing of declarations or the giving of speeches, and the hiding behind press releases and blog sites, but through the hard reiteration of difference in daily prayer, study, and listening, not to human words, but to the Word of God within which human words are to be judged.

This assumes, however, a new kind of open-endedness to council, something that Anglicanism has perhaps (unwittingly) permitted through its constant punting off of decisions to a later meeting, but that, in truth, has never truly been allowed for through the strict scheduling of agenda according to dates and times. Councils, quite frankly, should have no scheduled ending-times – much as ecumenical dialogues do not. This could only happen were they to be held in places where such freedom can be granted, both in terms of domicile and resources (e.g. schools, monasteries, large churches – not hotels), but so they should. 3 days, 5 days, 10 days: it is hardly possible, any longer, that such limited deadlines can contain the work that God would do with those who gather in the Word. Who can say? The councils of the past were what they were in this regard, sometimes better, sometimes worse. But this we can learn from them: the time they are given, no matter its extension, is never to be feared. And we have become cowards in the face of time.

To be sure, such open-endedness requires smaller groupings. Here, quite frankly, the fear of representation, particularly ecclesial representation in the form of bishops or other comparable figures, must also be overcome. Concern over representation has been, of course, a central conciliar topic. But unless it is a topic subordinated to a trust in the powerful and ordering character of the Word of God that gathers and founds the work of representation, the concern is frankly irrelevant. And when it is so subordinated, it is capable of a very flexible resolution. The character of consent over time that the conciliar life demands is not given, in the first place, by the immediate direct engagement of individuals, as if the larger numbers involved in any given gathering is correlated to the achievement of or at least approach to godly concord. Rather, it is the extension and even multiplication of council that does this across the years – the wheels within wheels. The only genuine reason I can see that some have, for instance, rejected the proposed Covenant's granting of liminal authority to the Primates' Meeting, as much for *ad hoc* reasons as deeply theological and pastoral ones (and there are these) is because there is little sense left – or not yet established – that Anglicanism does indeed function through a *network* of councils among which the Primates' Meeting truly is only one among many in its deliberations, and simply cannot *in fact* exist apart from the others. Many do not believe this because they are not willing to allow the wheels to spin in their correlated fashions across history.

There is no need to dwell on the fact that the last two elements of Gregory's vision of *concordantia* – its missionary outcome and sanctifying power and result – are at best shriveled fruit without the foundation of these earlier elements of council. And so it appears in Anglicanism today – although it must be emphasized that it is not possible simply to overleap conciliar demands *for the sake of* mission and holiness, as some are arguing, whose impatience

has proven the bread of bitterness. Council, if it is done in and for and through the Scriptures, is a part of mission; not its prolegomenon.

If only... if only we might right the ship in this direction. But these are just the elements of *concordantia* that seem to be eluding the Anglican Communion in the present. And it is unlikely that they shall simply be apprehended in a moment. Do we “fit” any longer, if ever at all, into the conciliar *typos*? It is doubtful. But whatever the case, it is irrefutable that the promises of conciliar life are probably still some ways off from fulfillment, and perhaps further off than only 5 years ago. Brokenness of council among us, including the proposed Covenant that may well go down in flames before ever having risen – a kind of reverse Phoenix -- is not only a looming threat; it seems to be a logical outcome to our present turmoil. This may not mean, necessarily, the end of the promise altogether. Nor would I want it to be; nor finally, even, do I think this is our fate. I remain convinced of the providential conciliar calling to Anglicanism on behalf of a larger church whose own “abuse” of council’s promise has been the more spectacularly demonstrated. But the intractable and renewed brokenness of the grander goal may imply that we are being driven by God to concentrate on only some of the smaller wheels, as it were, and on their interrelations at the most basic levels – within sub-diocesan units, for instance, and within dioceses, though no more. It is certainly to be wondered if the great Scriptural embrace of time that Gregory imagined can ever grip the Church’s consciousness and self-motivation without it first touching the daily life of congregations and related groups of Christians, a life that has for some time been so diluted over such great extent. And there have long been voices calling us to this level of conciliar regard as the necessary preamble to any grander hopes. Perhaps our larger brokenness is now simply the establishment of the truth of this call, part of the press of the conciliar life’s inner dynamic in any case from the beginning.

In which case, Anglicanism’s vocation within the larger Church will seem much less lofty than its admirers of the last century may have imagined. She – that is, *we!* -- shall face the choice of eliding her pieces – or allowing them to be so elided -- into the primal ecclesial soup of the Reformation’s rich, but ill-formed and ongoing confusion; or she, and we, may choose to be among the first Christian churches to truly heed the call, that remains at best partially received on Protestant and Catholic sides both: “Physician, heal thyself” (Lk. 4:23). A limited and self-oriented calling? Hardly. For such a heeding is also a gift to the world, when it is pursued under the grace of God’s Word gathering.

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