

Intimations of Synodality

Some aspects of what we now understand as synodality seem to have been present in the early Church, without the term being adopted. Here are a few examples.

ACTS

After Peter and John have been arrested by the religious leaders and finally released, their “friends” gathered as a group and prayed together in thanksgiving. They prayed that they might speak the word with boldness. Then the place was shaken and the Spirit came upon them. This enabled them to speak God’s word with boldness, given that were under threat of persecution. (4:23-31)

The whole group of believers “were of one heart and soul”. There was no division among them. Everything they owned was held in common, so that no one was in need. There is a clear sense of community here, a community of genuine relationships of friendship, a praying community, a community of generous sharing and care for those in need. (Acts 4:23-37).

After Peter “and some of the believers” go to visit the centurion named Cornelius at his request, and Peter speaks to him and those accompanying him, relatives, and friends, explaining the story of Jesus, the Holy Spirit is poured out upon the Gentiles, and Peter realises that they should be baptised, even though they are Gentiles. So “he ordered them to be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ.” This seems to imply that it was Peter’s companions who do the baptising. They are ‘ordinary’ disciples, believers, who have accompanied Peter; they are involved in ministry. (10:1-48)²

“The apostles and believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God.” Some of the “circumcised” believers in Jerusalem openly criticise Peter and demand an explanation for his involvement with Gentiles. Peter was accompanied by six ‘brothers’ on this visit. After Peter explains what has happened, they are convinced and praise God for giving even the Gentiles “the repentance that leads to life”. It is interesting that Peter hadn’t gone to visit Cornelius alone; he took other believers with him. Also the members of the Jerusalem community did not hesitate to confront Peter. They were open to discussion; they listened, and were willing to change their opinions. (11:1-18)

At the time of a famine, the disciples resident in Antioch, a community developing independently of Jerusalem,³ decided that each according to their ability would send relief to the believers living in Judea. (11:27-30)

Later King Herod “laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church.” He killed James, the brother of John, and then arrested and imprisoned Peter. “While Peter was kept in prison the church prayed fervently to God for him.” On being miraculously released from prison, Peter went immediately to the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark, “where many had gathered and were praying.” Peter, having gained access, explains to them what has happened, and then speedily departs because of the danger from Herod. It seems that Mary’s large house is a focal point for members of the Christian community, a centre of prayer. (12:1-17)

The burning issue about the need for converts to be circumcised comes to a head in what is usually referred to as the Council of Jerusalem. The problem arose because “certain

individuals” were teaching the necessity for circumcision for converted Gentiles. “So the apostles and elders met together to consider the matter.” After Peter has given his view, based on his experience, Paul and Barnabas give an account of their ministry to the Gentiles. “Then the apostles and elders with the consent of the whole church decided to choose men from among their members and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.” With them they also send Judas and Silas, who are “leaders among the brothers” with a letter explaining that the burden of circumcision was not applicable to them. The letter states “we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you.” On reaching Antioch “they gathered the congregation together” and delivered the letter. “When its members read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation. (15:1-35) The participation of members of the community in decision making and ministry is interesting.

Later, as Paul is sailing to Jerusalem after working in a number of locations, he reaches Tyre. Before leaving, all the disciples with their wives and children, knelt down on the beach and prayed together, and said farewell. (21:1-6)

MATTHEW

There is a section in the Gospel of Matthew which deals with Church life. It deals with the need for humility and pastoral care (the parable of the lost sheep), the handling of a recalcitrant member, and the gift of forgiveness. The second topic is of particular interest for our theme. The text reads:

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.” (18:15-17)

A process is outlined for dealing with a recalcitrant member of the christian community, someone acting or living in a way contrary to the values of the community.⁴ Firstly, there is private personal correction, avoiding embarrassment. If this is successful, a member of the community is won back, “a stray sheep is brought back to the fold.”⁵ If not, other members of the community become involved as witnesses to the attempt at reconciliation. If this too fails, the full assembly of the local community comes together and makes a decisive judgement. If the person is persistent, he/she is to be treated as a nonbeliever, no longer belonging to the community (excommunicated). One scholar suggests that the phrasing may also suggest that “the community’s pastoral concern for the errant member does not completely end, even after the painful step of expulsion has taken place.”⁶

Matthew’s text, addressing the community, continues: “Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” These words were earlier addressed to Peter (16:19), now to the whole community. One scholar writes: “The church is seen as a group of Christians acting and deciding together; no special leadership role is mentioned.”⁷

The text continues: “Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

PAUL

In 1 Corinthians a number of points occur, some not dissimilar to what we found in Matthew.

At the outset it becomes clear that the newly formed community is divided, rather than being “in the same mind and the same purpose”, as Paul would have expected. A group of them, referred to as “Chloe’s people”, has reported the situation to Paul, and he responds. (1:10-31) He refers to the same problem in chapter 3. In chapter 5 he responds to a serious case of sexual immorality present in the community, giving the impression that he is disappointed that the community hadn’t dealt with the situation themselves, but had allowed it to continue. Now he has to intervene and give direction. In the following chapter he addresses the issue of lawsuits involving members of the community which are dealt with by unbelievers. He clearly expects members of the Christian community to deal with them. “Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to decide between one believer and another...?” (6:5)

In chapter 11: 17-34, he addresses problems arising “when you come together as a church” (community), for there are factions connected with the celebration of the Eucharist (the Lord’s supper), including painful and humiliating distinctions between rich and poor. Later, in 14:20, he writes “Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking; rather, be infants in evil but in thinking be adults.” In 14:26-33, he discusses the situations when the community gathers for worships, and different people clearly have contributions to make and are encouraged to do so – hymns, lessons, revelations, tongues, interpretations.

In 16:1-4 Paul encourages the Corinthian community to be generous in collecting money each week. “When I arrive I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem. Paul’s final comment is to state that “The churches of Asia send greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house greet you warmly in the Lord.” This couple are mentioned also in Acts 18 as people with whom Paul stayed in Corinth when he first went there. When he left Corinth he took them with him, leaving them in Ephesus while he continued to Caesarea. In Ephesus they are involved in helping Apollos to understand better the faith in which he had already been instructed. As lay folk, they obviously are very involved in ministry.