

The Anglican Communion Covenant: A Church of England Objection from an Evangelical Perspective¹

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It would be interesting to conduct a survey of what it is that English Anglicans most value about their Church. It might be its worship; it might be its restraint; it might even – particularly if we are asking a group of evangelicals – be its formularies, namely the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, *The Book of Common Prayer* and the Ordering of Bishops, Priests and Deacons. It should therefore be startling to Anglicans that we are being asked to agree to a covenant which ignores our liturgical tradition, responds to a presenting issue, and adds to our formularies. Several dioceses in the Church of England have already voted against the proposed Covenant, and in this short paper I seek to explain my own reasons for rejecting it.

The first reason for rejecting the proposed Covenant is that it is mistaken about the Bible. The Covenant begins by quoting 1 John 1.2-4, presumably because the apostle uses the word 'communion'. The reason John gives for writing his letter is that those who believe might be assured of eternal life (1 John 5.13). This assurance rests on the apostolic proclamation of the life which God has revealed in Jesus Christ, and it is this apostolic proclamation which is expounded week by week in the churches of the Anglican Communion. This is a helpful way for the Covenant to begin, because it acknowledges that the Church is formed and reformed not by the Church's formularies, however helpful they may be, but by the work of God's Holy Spirit as the prophetic and apostolic testimony to Jesus Christ is declared. The sad irony is that this is precisely how the Covenant does not use the Bible.

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The scriptural content of the Covenant, particularly in its Introduction, relies on a method called 'proof texting': points are made, and a biblical reference is offered in parentheses afterwards. The classical Anglican spiritual practice is the continuous reading of Scripture within the doctrinal and devotional framework of the daily office. In Morning and Evening Prayer, the canticles, the prayers, and the rhythm of the Church year, act as hermeneutical tools, interpreting the Scriptures for us so that they become more and more part of our common life. Simply to cite a verse of Scripture in order to make a point is contrary to that inheritance. It is, therefore, as pastorally unhelpful as it is theologically unsophisticated.

This lack of sophistication is evident in paragraph 1.2.5, which refers to 'the expectation that Scripture [will] continue...to illuminate and transform the Church and its members'. Aside from the curious ecclesiology which separates the Church from the people who make up the Church, this is troubling because it both claims too little and too much for Scripture. It claims too little because it suggests a lack of assurance that the Church will be illuminated and transformed: the Funeral Service does refer to our 'sure and certain hope', but 'hope' has an eschatological force that is absent from mere 'expectation'. At the same time, it claims too much, because it ascribes to Scripture the power to 'illuminate and transform': this introduces a problem, because such power does not belong to Scripture, but to the God who has inspired the Scriptures. This is the 'central claim' of N. T. Wright's short book *Scripture and the Authority of God*: 'the phrase "authority of Scripture" can only make Christian sense if it is shorthand for "the authority of the triune God, exercised somehow *through* scripture".' (p. 17) Such shorthand may be helpful for Christians in their daily lives. But in a document which assumes the authority of the proposed Covenant, it is very dangerous indeed. The Covenant is mistaken about the Bible.

The second reason for rejecting the proposed Covenant is that it is mistaken about the Church. The preamble to the Covenant refers to 'the Churches of the Anglican Communion', and the document goes on to refer to 'each Church', thus separating the churches one from another. It is implied that 'the Church' is synonymous with 'the province'. This is contrary to the Thirty-nine Articles, which state that 'The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.' (Article XIX) The 'basic unit' is not the province. Nor is it the diocese. It is the individual congregation. This is not 'congregationalist', because congregations are rightly drawn together in a diocese by their bishop, from whom the apostolic ministry of word and

sacrament comes. However, to refer to a province as 'a Church' is to demonstrate a lack of understanding of Anglican ecclesiology. Once again, a useful shorthand is in danger of inadvertently becoming a doctrinal commitment.

The lack of clarity about Scripture and the Church comes together in paragraph 2.1.5. We are called to 'affirm the ecumenical vocation of Anglicanism to the full visible unity of the Church in accordance with Christ's prayer that "all may be one".' The implication of this affirmation is that Our Lord's high priestly prayer in John 17.11 has not been answered. This raises a Christological problem, because it is not possible for the second Person of the divine Trinity to make a request of the Father which is unanswered. It misunderstands the words of Jesus, which are a prayer for the continuous unity which will be given in his death and resurrection and the subsequent outpouring of his Holy Spirit, not in the mutual recognition of each other's bishops (however desirable that may be). And it is also an ecclesiological mistake: those who come to God in the name of Jesus Christ already are one, because they have received the Holy Spirit and have been drawn into the communion to which the beginning of the Covenant refers when it quotes 1 John 1. Visible unity, while not irrelevant, is secondary to the invisible unity which is already ours in Christ, and it is not the primary concern of John 17.11. The Covenant is mistaken about the Church.

The third reason for rejecting the proposed Covenant is that it is mistaken about humanity. This is particularly the case in the much-discussed 'fourth section' of the Covenant, which deals with 'Our Covenanted Life Together'. Paragraphs 4.2.4 and 4.2.5 refer to 'relational consequences' which may be the result of a province seeking to dissent from the contents of the Covenant. These shady 'consequences' are not described. Their presence in the Covenant is a veiled threat. Under these circumstances, the 'joy' which is declared at the end of the Covenant is an impossibility. We know from our own lives that friendships only work when we know we are loved by the other person regardless of who we are or what we do: as the apostle Paul might express it, we 'carry each other's burdens' (Galatians 6.2), rejoicing in the other person even when we disagree with him or her. It is this which enables us to speak the truth in love to one another. By contrast, a friendship where there are unstated 'relational consequences' is not a true friendship. To be in a family where there are unstated 'relational consequences' is to be unloved, with all of the dysfunction and unhappiness that implies.

While it may seem unfair to criticize the Covenant for what it fails to say, its lack of ease with our humanity is seen in its refusal to engage with the presenting issue, which is the disagreement in our Communion about the

blessedness or otherwise of homosexual relationships, a disagreement which was brought to the fore by the 2003 consecration of Gene Robinson as bishop in the Diocese of New Hampshire. The other formularies of the Church of England demonstrate a degree of engagement which is entirely foreign to the Covenant: the Thirty-nine Articles unequivocally address Reformation disputes, the presenting issues of the day; *The Book of Common Prayer* is a book of liturgies for the use of Christians in their daily and weekly worship; and the Ordering of Bishops, Priests and Deacons is a way of providing pastoral oversight for Christians. But the Covenant fails to engage with the presenting issue, and lacks such a liturgical and pastoral focus. It therefore sits very uneasily alongside the other formularies. Simply pretending the presenting issue does not exist is a pastoral and ecclesial disaster. The Covenant is mistaken about humanity.

The continental Reformation produced a number of confessions of faith. Instead of this, the English Reformation produced a set of liturgies: English Christians were drawn together not by guarantors of orthodoxy, but by worshipping God in response to his Word to us in Jesus Christ. It is this which has enabled Anglicans to be open with one another about our differences, without fear of hidden reprisals or 'relational consequences'. At a time when the Church needs to be drawn back to Scripture, grow in its self-understanding, and acknowledge its humanity, the proposed Covenant gives us words which are mistaken about the Bible and the Church and which, rather than deepening our friendships, cause us to step away from one another. If we accept one another because we have accepted this Covenant, we have failed to understand not only what it is to be Anglican, but also what it is to be Christian.

That is why I reject the Anglican Covenant.

