Review

Scott MacDougall, 'The Covenant Conundrum: How Affirming an Eschatological Ecclesiology Could Help the Anglican Communion', *Anglican Theological Review*, 94:1, Winter 2012, pp. 5-26.

The *Anglican Theological Review* are to be congratulated on devoting over 20 pages to this detailed analysis of eschatological theory and its implications for the Anglican Covenant.

Seen 'as a relational response to a relational crisis' (p. 6), the Covenant is often analysed in terms of its relational effects, where most of the discussion is about 'the extent to which it is confessional, contractual, conservative, centralizing, and punitive', but '[a]n honest appraisal reveals a degree of truth on both sides of each question: the covenant is and is not confessional, contractual, conservative, centralizing, and punitive' (p. 7). Therefore,

> Making explicit the implicit ecclesiological viewpoints concerning the *quality* of normative ecclesial relationality that ought to characterize Communion life and the extent to which the covenant furthers or inhibits it may be the only way to resolve the issue (p.7).

MacDougall develops an eschatological response to this question. Rejecting the extremes of 'realized' and 'future' eschatology, he argues for an 'anticipated' eschatology in which the church 'reveals proleptically something of the quality of eschatological relationality' (p. 10). The task of the church is to express, here and now, the quality of relationships which will apply in the future kingdom. Churches are never finished or definitive. He lists five characteristics of this 'anticipated eschatology': a dynamic tensiveness between the now and the not yet, an openness to the emergence of the new, a willingness to risk being wrong or being hurt, a stance of trust, and hope for the future. These are described at length.

Having described this approach, the article then contrasts two Anglican reports. One is the Kuala Lumpur Report of the third Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission (IATDC), entitled *Communion, Conflict and Hope*. The other is the *Windsor Report*, the text which first formally proposed an Anglican Covenant. The IATDC report

> implicitly and diplomatically critiques *Windsor*'s ecclesiology for embodying an impulse... to theologically justify ridding the Communion of conflict through 'unity' and 'containment,' an impulse expressed concretely in the covenant proposal (p. 17).

Thus *Windsor*

> is not an anticipated eschatology but a too-realized one that … betrays an ahistorical ecclesiology, an 'ecclesiology from above,' one that … sees the institutional church as possessing all the answers, able to set the terms for every debate, and not requiring ongoing reformation (p. 20).

What alternative would his 'anticipated eschatology' offer? I particularly liked this description:

> There is no question that the Communion should always be working toward ever greater theological consensus. This is important for an ecclesial body's sense of itself, its relations with its ecumenical partners, and its deep desire to live into its best understanding of the truth … . But agreement cannot be pursued instrumentally nor imposed externally. It is an organic outgrowth of dynamic relationship. It is open to finding God at work in the church and in the world in new and surprising (and challenging) ways, and affirms the radical plurality and historicity of creation. It is always partial and provisional (tensive), which is precisely why comprehensiveness and latitude have been valued over systematic theologies in the Anglican tradition, and why doctrinal development and contextualization have been consistently affirmed over a conservative traditionalism (pp. 22-23).

MacDougall's argument is clear, and will convince those who accept his eschatology. It does, after all, demand of the church that openness to new insights to which the American and Canadian churches appealed in their affirmations of same-sex partnerships. What about those who hold

different eschatologies, or who have no interest in eschatology at all? The *Windsor Report* explicitly rejected the North American actions; while allowing for possible innovations, it restricted them by demanding unrealistic procedures. The Covenant text, while avoiding all mention of same-sex partnerships, followed *Windsor* by insisting that no innovations should be attempted without the approval of international Anglicanism. If all Anglican provinces were committed to MacDougall's eschatology, innovations might yet be possible; but many are committed to alternatives, and the Covenant would give them power to prevent innovations. The significant alternative has a catholic and an evangelical version. In the catholic case the church is an eschatological entity, its final form fixed so that any deviation constitutes heresy. In the evangelical case God's revelation has been given in its final form, so that deviation from biblical truth constitutes a renunciation of Christianity.

Many Anglicans, of course, accept one or other of these beliefs without thinking of them as eschatological doctrines at all. To these we must add the other Anglicans who have no interest in eschatological theory at all. What does MacDougall have to say to them?

In my *Liberal Faith in a Divided Church* I reached similar conclusions, but from the direction of epistemology (how we get to know things) rather than eschatology. MacDougall's argument draws attention to elements of the debate which mine overlooked. Particularly important is the connection between Anglican theories about the nature of the church and what those theories imply about how the church should operate. Perhaps the key question is whether the church should be free to change its beliefs about doctrine and ethics in the light of changing circumstances or new information. If so, what are the legitimate processes? The Covenant proposes a clearly-defined top-down process, with questions submitted to a hierarchy which will pronounce judgement for the entire Communion. The judgement will then become a belief which all Anglicans are expected to accept, and will thereby restrict further innovations. The present system, in which provinces decide for themselves, accepting that they will sometimes disagree with each other, is untidy and does not allow control by central authorities. This, however, is precisely the kind of church we should expect if MacDougall's theory is correct. I think it is.

Jonathan Clatworthy
2 February 2012

Responses to Questions Raised by Jonathan Clatworthy in His Review of "The Covenant Conundrum"

Here, I would like to respond to two questions that Jonathan Clatworthy has rightly and helpfully raised in his review of my article.

What Version of Eschatology Is on Offer?

I agree wholeheartedly that not everyone is going to agree with my version of eschatology. For some, particularly those whose ecclesiology tends to look like the "communion ecclesiology" in the ascendant among Roman Catholic theologians and the framers of the Virginia Report and its descendant, the Windsor Report, my ecclesiology is not "realized" enough. Such theologians tend to think that the eschatological promises of God were spiritual promises that have dawned in and are being realized by the church whenever the church is faithful to its vocation. I argue that the church is not the site of eschatological fulfillment, that God's plans for creation are much, much larger than the church, and to think of eschatological ultimacy as a perfection of or in the church is to risk a triumphalism and ecclesiocentrism that, I think, are exactly what we find in Windsor and the

proposed Anglican Covenant. For others, social activists and theologians whose viewpoints tend more toward the "prophetic" (a stance with which I have tremendous sympathy), my eschatology is also not sufficiently realized because, for them, true eschatological thinking is revolutionary. It seeks to bring about now the radical shift in the human heart demanded by the Sermon on the Mount and to effect the Kingdom in the world now. This is the tack that liberation theologians often take, and it's also very much the view of many of modern questers of the historical Jesus, like Borg and Crossan, who find it necessary to tame the wildness and strangeness of the eschatological dicta of Jesus and the early church by morphing them into a social program. (Of course, I also take the Sermon and like passages to indicate a kind of eschatological social program! But not in exactly the same way. That's another story.) In both cases, my eschatology won't be "realized" enough for them. But notice that this is because, for both, they don't actually take scripture at its word when it comes to eschatological imagining. They spiritualize the promises of God out of being a promise for the fulfillment of God's intentions for creation and fold them into the process of being "born anew" into a new mode of being in the world—either into being a member of God's holy church, in the case of communion ecclesiologies, or into being a revolutionary in the establishment of the Kingdom to whatever extent is currently possible, in the case of the prophetic ones. Of course, this is too broad and almost a caricature of those positions. But it does mark a tendency on their part. and I think it does so because the idea of eschatology is often very outré and somewhat embarrassing to contemporary people.

What I'm after is a view of eschatology that struggles to make sense of the disparate images of God's promised plenitude in scripture, taking seriously that this is a future, ultimate reality, yet one that we can anticipate in the present by pointing toward it through a particular mode of living together, in and outside of the church. The fulfillment of God's promises is a deep mystery, but an energizing one because of that mystery. To be always looking to find what the Holy Spirit is up to, to always have hope that something beautiful is on the way, to believe that we can choose to work with God in God's mission to bring about the New Jerusalem, but always with the understanding that what is actually on the horizon is something we could never fully imagine, let alone foresee or build ourselves, puts our lives into a much larger context where we are less sure of our own rightness and more sure of God's. I think, therefore, for many reasons I've only hinted at here, that we do ourselves a huge disservice spiritually when we take the bite out of eschatology by trying to "figure it out" or "explain it away," or when eschatological vision is co-opted by one "side" or the other. The point of eschatology is that it is a goodness that escapes us. We can participate in it. But we cannot possess it. We cannot claim to know God's mind. Eschatology is hard. It is a tremendous mystery. It is meant to be struggled with, in humility.

Would Commitment to Eschatological Ecclesiology Inhibit "Innovation"?

First, I tend to avoid that term, as it is often used by traditionalists to suggest that what has happened in North America is a sort of monstrous act of genetic engineering that has altered the DNA of Anglicanism here. It's as close as they seem to want to come to calling this "heresy" without using that inflammatory term, so I like to avoid it.

Now, would commitment to an eschatological ecclesiology prohibit theological development or prophetic action undertaken thoughtfully and carefully and after lots of prayer and corporate discernment? Absolutely not! It would not prohibit this any more than it would prohibit a conservative action undertaken for precisely the same reasons. What it does do is allow us to see that this side of the coming Reign of God, none of us has all the answers. Therefore, we are called to struggle on together the best we can, even—and maybe especially—when we disagree. Love, not agreement, is the biblical imperative. God has more in store for us than we, singly or in groups (even churches), can ever see. This eschatological reality tempers our self-inflated sense of our grasp on The Truth and keeps us open and searching for ways to trust in and live together with others, not because we agree but because we love, and because we know that reconciliation is

always God's promise to us. Now, this also means struggling together to live into that reconciliation, since we imagine this to be God's mission and we want to be part of that. That is part of the work, too. But it equally means being intensely and lovingly faithful to our best sense of what it means to be God's church, even when that makes other portions of God's church uncomfortable. They key is to maintain such healthy and mutually interdependent relations with one another that those real, deep, abiding, and actual "bonds of affection," combined with trust and hope in God's plan, keep us together when we can't agree on something painful. This is why I am convinced that efforts like the Continuing Indaba Project, diocesan partnership programs, visitation and service initiatives, and other means of strengthening face-to-face relationships are more in keeping with an eschatological ecclesiology and will serve to make the Anglican Communion stronger and healthier than the wan legalisms of the Anglican Covenant.

Scott MacDougall
2 February 2012