



No Anglican Covenant Coalition

Anglicans for Comprehensive Unity

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30 NOVEMBER 2010

Observations on the Archbishop of Canterbury's Presidential Address and the Anglican Covenant Debate in the Church of England General Synod, November 2010

In his Presidential Address on 23 November 2010, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams presented a message of fear and gloom to the Church of England General Synod. He suggested that, if the Synod did not accept the Anglican Covenant, we could witness the "piece-by-piece dissolution of the Communion." The "risk and reality of such rupture [of some aspects of communion] is already there, make no mistake," he said. "Historic allegiances cannot be taken for granted." If we try to carry on as usual, he warned, there is a danger of creating "new structures in which relation to the Church of England and the See of Canterbury are likely not to figure significantly."

The Archbishop's message was clear—be afraid of rejecting the Covenant. It is the only lifeboat in the troubled sea of Anglicanism, and doing nothing or being idealistic is not an option. It is particularly ironic that Dr. Williams painted a picture of a frightening Anglican dystopia should the Covenant fail, as he and other supporters of the Covenant have been quick to accuse Covenant sceptics of "scaremongering." It is also surprising, both in this speech and in the subsequent debate, that concerns were raised about the decline of the role of the Church of England, as well as references to its being "the mother church" that needs to set an example, whereas Covenant sceptics have been accused of being "Little Englanders."

The interpretation that most people put on the speech was that Dr. Williams saw the Covenant as the only way to keep the GAFCON Primates and their allies in the Anglican Communion. Ironically, even as the 24 November debate on the Covenant was going on, GAFCON issued its "Oxford Statement," which rejected the Covenant as being "fatally flawed" and insisted on the more conservative Jerusalem Statement as the foundation of international Anglicanism.

The Archbishop asserted that the Covenant is not "a tool of exclusion and tyranny." "To say yes to the Covenant is not to tie our hands," he insisted. It is difficult to see, however, how a document that, in the words of the Windsor Report, is to "make explicit and forceful the loyalty and bonds of affection which govern the relationships between the churches of the Communion" is not coercive, and it is likewise difficult to see how enforcing "relational consequences" on a church that might take a "controversial action" is not a punishment. Bishop John Saxbee, Bishop of Lincoln, put it like this:

Anglicanism has been described as a fellowship of civilised disagreement. Well I leave you to judge whether a two-tier Communion with first and second division members answers to that description of civilised disagreement. It frankly feels like we will be sending sincere and faithful Anglicans to stand in the corner until they have seen the error of their ways and can return to the ranks of the pure and spotless.

The Archbishop spoke of loyalty and catholicity. Apparently, he thinks that belief and practice should be uniform across the Communion. Otherwise, the Church—he consistently speaks of the Anglican Church—is disordered, and if the Church is disordered, then the faith is disordered and the mission of the Church is compromised. If necessary, personal convictions need to be sacrificed for the greater good of the Church, and those who refuse are disloyal. In reality, of course, there are only Anglican *churches*, and many, unlike Dr. Williams, do not want to create a worldwide Anglican Church.

Uniformity will be facilitated by affording the Standing Committee greater powers. This is a group of fifteen people who will act as judge and jury when conflicts arise. Section 4.2.4 of the Covenant states:

The Standing Committee shall make every effort to facilitate agreement, and may take advice from such bodies as it deems appropriate to determine a view on the nature of the matter at question and those relational consequences which may result.

During the debate, lawyer Jacky Humphreys confirmed this, saying, “It’s a very gentle way of saying it, but it is a determination of the issue; that is, a judicial decision.”

Although Dr. Williams says that the tendency of the last hundred years has been to centralise, increasing the number of “Instruments of Communion,” the No Anglican Covenant Coalition sees this increasing centralisation as a radical departure for Anglicanism. The Lambeth Conference and Primates’ Meeting have been instituted to discuss and share ideas, not to impose a single view on the whole Communion. The Covenant speaks of the Provinces as being family members, and this is perhaps an apt metaphor. However, Dr. Miranda Threlfall-Holmes spoke about the misuse of this term in the document:

As a University Chaplain I see, all too often, the emotional damage done when a family puts conditions on their love, on their support and on the continuation of relationships. “Relational consequences” sounds very chilling indeed. We are told that the Covenant sets out the framework for family relationships. But what sort of family lives by a covenant, with “relational consequences” for breaches of the rules?

During the debate, the vote on the Covenant became a vote of confidence in the Archbishop of Canterbury. Thus was the integrity of the synodical process compromised, with speeches that centred not on the document that was being considered, but on how Dr. Williams needed support and how he knew better than the Synod what would be good for the Anglican Communion. This was consistent with Dr. Williams’ Presidential Address, with its assertion that the Covenant “represents work done by theologians of similarly diverse views,” as though theologians also know what is better for the Communion than do members of the General Synod.

Those who spoke against the Covenant were assured that General Synod members were not agreeing to accept the Covenant, but merely allowing the process of discussion to continue in the dioceses. By voting yes, they could at once be loyal to Dr. Williams while retaining serious reservations about the wisdom of the Covenant in its current form.

The idea of an Anglican Covenant was always a means to placate those in the Anglican Communion who were upset by the “controversial” actions of The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada. The Oxford Statement makes it clear, however, that that faction of the Communion will never be satisfied with unity without uniformity. Its insistence on the Jerusalem Declaration is proof that not even the first three sections of the Anglican Covenant are acceptable. It is obvious that the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans created by the GAFCON movement is intended as a separate, “pure” Anglican Communion that will include churches, such as the Anglican Church in North America, that are not part of the present Communion.

In these circumstances, the churches that subscribe to a more traditional view of Anglicanism than the Anglican vision asserted by GAFCON should abandon the Covenant, which can only divide them, and re-establish the Anglican Communion as a tolerant fellowship of autonomous national and regional churches.