

# **The Case Against the Anglican Covenant<sup>1</sup>**

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March 13, 2011

Let me begin by saying what a pleasure it is to be with you this evening at St. Andrew's. I am honored to get the chance to explore this issue with you all. My thanks to Bruce for the invitation and to you all.

As you have no doubt figured out by now, I don't support the Anglican Covenant. There are a host of very good reasons to reject the idea of an Anglican Covenant, but they all point to how the Covenant fundamentally changes the nature of Anglicanism. With this Covenant, our tradition becomes a different animal. The messy genius that is Anglicanism gets compromised, and something fundamentally different comes out the other side. Our polity, the nature and ground of our relationships, our way of having disagreements, and our approach to theology all change with the Anglican Covenant. The Covenant actually distorts and damages the thing it is trying to save, and, as such, it is a cure that is worse than the disease.

Of course, on the surface, the Covenant doesn't appear to do any such thing. Most Anglicans would agree that the formularies that it draws on have been normative for most Anglicans. It relies on the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral and the Five Marks of Mission. It lifts up scripture as the norm and rule of faith, interpreted in light of the Creeds and tradition. Moreover, it assures its signatories that each member church is autonomous. On the surface, it appears to be a benign document. But we shouldn't stop at the surface because, once the document starts to be used and it gets some "teeth," our beloved tradition will permanently change.

How, you ask? Well, first of all it changes our polity by centralizing power into the hands of a few. Secondly, it changes the relationships of member churches of the Communion to each other by elevating coercion over mutual affection. And finally, it changes the way we do theology and the way we disagree over issues of theology. We'll now look at each of these.

## **1. It changes our polity**

Anglicanism finds its origins in a reaction against the overreaching authority of a distant power structure. When the Church in England rejected the authority of the Pope, the claim was primarily a claim about the right of the Church in a particular context to make pastoral decisions appropriate for that context. When the Church in England rejected the authority of the Pope, it did so on the grounds that the Commonwealth of England was threatened by a foreign bishop. Other reformation issues came with this decision, but we shouldn't forget that one of our critical differences with the Church in Rome is over the issue of authority. In some way, Anglicanism has always asserted that locality and particularity are essential for Catholicity.

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<sup>1</sup> Presented at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as part of the presentation "The Anglican Covenant: Point-Counterpoint.

An analogous issue was in play with the origins of our own church. The Episcopal Church formed shortly after the Revolution, and the concerns were again pastoral and related to Church authorities in a distant land. As the relationships began to become more formal in the Anglican Communion starting in the nineteenth century, each of the provinces of the Anglican Communion has always been assured of its own autonomy. On the surface, the Covenant gives lip service to autonomy; in practice and actuality, it would strip the member churches of their independence, and it would elevate uniformity over local particularity.

Imagine a controversy. It doesn't need to be about issues of human sexuality—really, it could be any controversy. Imagine one province taking issue with another province's decision on the controversial matter. Under the Covenant, a decision about what qualifies as an acceptable or unacceptable development gets moved from the provincial level to the Communion level. Ultimately, the 15-Member Standing Committee of the Anglican Communion can recommend the exclusion of an offending church from the main bodies of the Communion or can invoke some other "relational consequence" because of a decision that church has made. While it is true that the Standing Committee could not forbid a member church from making a decision, it could impose a punishment for actions. To borrow an analogy that I saw online, this would be like telling a child that she is free to eat or not eat her broccoli, but that, if she doesn't eat her broccoli, she doesn't get dessert and she has to go to her room. This is not what autonomy looks like in my mind. With the Covenant, member churches would effectively lose their right to decide for themselves how best to serve their context and would need to rely on the Standing Committee for approval of any decision or face the consequences.

The centralization of power in the Standing Committee created by the Covenant will make the Communion more strictly hierarchical. It will invest power mainly in bishops, who make up most of the Standing Committee's members, and in the hand of bureaucrats in the Anglican Communion Office. There would be no one to appeal to beyond the Standing Committee, and its decision would become law. Our church's democratic polity would be threatened as a result, as power is taken from the hands of laypeople and rank-and-file clergy, and moved into the hands of bishops.

## **2. It changes our relationships**

When the Windsor Report looked to justify its assertion of the need for a Covenant, it said that the Covenant was intended "to make explicit and forceful the bonds of affection which govern the relationships between the churches of the Communion." I don't know about you, but the terms "explicit and forceful" coupled with the phrase "bonds of affection" has an ominous ring.

Up until now, nothing has ultimately bound the member churches of the Communion together except mutual love and respect. The structures of the Communion have been in place in order to facilitate relationship. The Communion has held together because we have wanted to be together. We are now experiencing a period where certain churches are in impaired or in broken relationship with the Episcopal Church. This

is an example of a kind of family feud and a family argument. Our hope for restored relationship and for reconciliation, and our work for that goal, will operate on a family level.

But, if the structures of the Anglican Communion become more juridical, as they will under the Covenant, the whole metaphor of a family falls away. Then what binds us together is a structure of signatory churches that have pledged fidelity to the text of the Covenant. The Covenant becomes our way of enabling full and mutual relationship. Those who don't sign will potentially not have a full place in the life of the Communion, as they become second-tier churches. So too will those churches that don't abide by the decision of the Standing Committee on an issue of controversy. As a result, Anglican unity could be even more damaged than it is right now.

Moreover, the Covenant could weaken the bonds of affection internally within the member churches themselves. Inevitably, local disagreements will be easily internationalized and harder to resolve. Forces within a member church will ultimately appeal to the Communion level for resolution, and thus appeal to a political process more than to mutual care and regard. The Covenant grew out of such an appeal following the Episcopal Church's decision to consecrate the Rev. Gene Robinson. The Covenant has the potential to make such appeals a regular and disruptive feature of our common life.

While proponents of the Covenant appeal to the theological concept of *koinonia* or communion by mutual participation, *koinonia* is actually under assault by the Covenant itself. It makes everything about the relationships within our own church and our church's relationship to the other churches in the Communion more political, not less so. The best part of the Covenant is the Introduction. It recognizes that our unity abides on levels that are deeper than mere intellectual assent. Quite simply, our unity rests in the Divine Life of the eternal relationships found in the One Holy and undivided Trinity. By virtue of our Baptisms and by the Holy Spirit, we have become members of the body of Christ. Our unity is in God, who, through Christ, breaks down the barriers that separate us. Ironically, the Covenant undermines its own goal by erecting juridical structures to ensure our relationships. This, I'm afraid, will have the exact opposite effect from what was intended. Baptism and the Eucharist will count for less. Charity and mutual regard will count for less.

### **3. It changes our approach to theology and our way of disagreeing**

Let's face it, Anglicanism has a dirty little secret, but it's not what you think. Anglicanism's secret is that it is not sure it actually exists. What is Anglicanism? Is there such a thing as Anglican Theology? Like everything else in Anglicanism, you probably won't get the same answer from any two Anglicans. The 100<sup>th</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, thought there certainly was such a thing as Anglican Theology, and he thought that it was quite different from other brands of theology. Ramsey said, "[Anglican theology] is neither a system nor a confession (the idea of an Anglican "confessionalism" suggests something that never has been and never can be) but a method, a use and a direction, it cannot be defined or even

perceived as a “thing in itself,” and it may elude the eyes of those who ask “What is it?” and “Where is it?” It has been proved, and will be proved again, by its fruits and its works.”

To Ramsey, following in the footsteps of Richard Hooker and most Anglican Divines, Anglican Theology is a tool. It is a tool that is intended to bring us into deeper relationship with God and with our neighbor. It is meant to facilitate right praise, prayer, thanksgiving, and service. Ramsey said of Hooker’s theology that it did far less and far more than the theology of Calvin and Luther. It did far less because it did not offer a complete scheme or system of Biblical doctrine or an experiential assurance of justification or an infallibilist system of dogma. But it did far more because it involved the whole of the person, rather than only parts. It upheld Scripture, Reason, and Tradition as authoritative sources for the theological project. To quote Ramsey again, “It dealt with the whole man, both by its reverence for his reason and his conscience and by its refusal to draw a circle around the inward personal element in religion and to separate it from ‘the world of external things.’”

As a result, Anglican theology is often messy. We disagree a lot and we always have. We don’t have ready-made answers or assurances beyond our reliance on Scripture and the Creeds, the Tradition, and our God-given minds. And all of these things need to be interpreted. There is no system or final arbiter for a right answer. This side of the eschaton, “we look through a glass darkly.” And yet, we have survived and thrived because of this fact. We should be astounded by the resiliency of Anglicanism. Its comprehensiveness and its ability to deal with profound disagreement are nothing short of a miracle. Our theological heritage has enabled us to hold on to our ways, or to return to our ways when we have fallen astray, while at the same time, allowing us to respond to new ways and new contexts. We should be looking to export it, not dismiss it.

And yet, with the Covenant, we are looking to trade away our birthright. On one level, the Covenant will be just another authoritative document, it’s true. But we now will be elevating the interpretation of a few people to positions of authority. Where before, the Bible was the ultimate authority on matters of faith, now the interpretation of the Bible by the Standing Committee will be deemed as ultimately authoritative. Of course, a proponent of the Covenant will deny this, but, in practice, this is what will happen. The Covenant process will deem certain practices in compliance with the Covenant, and therefore acceptable in Anglicanism, and will declare others as outside. It will look to make the messiness and the comprehensiveness of Anglican theology and the Anglican project a thing of the past.

## **In closing**

The irony, of course, is that I am undoubtedly the more theologically progressive of your two presenters, but my arguments are all conservative. I am afraid of what this innovation will do to the tradition that I love and to the church that I have taken vows in. I am afraid that, because of our current crisis, the Covenant is being used to centralize power, weaken the bonds of affection, and distort our theological heritage. It is a medicine that hurts worse than the disease.

Now, I can appeal to progressive arguments as well. The Covenant will hurt our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, as it puts an undue burden for the fate of the Communion on their already burdened shoulders. It will be a triumph for the conservative and the reactionary, as every development will have to go to the Supreme Court of the Standing Committee. Justice will be thwarted and threatened by the Covenant—and on and on. But I appeal to you today on conservative grounds because I believe these are grounds on which the majority of us can agree.

Let us not change our fundamental way of being because of a momentary crisis. Let us recognize that we have had disagreements in the past and that we will in the future, but the Covenant will not help make our disagreements go away; it will only hurt our eventual reconciliation.

I thank you for your time and your consideration.