

Redefining Anglicanism? An Evangelical Critique of the Proposed Anglican Covenant*

Everyone claims to be the defender of the true spirit of Anglicanism, and to describe that spirit as orthodox, mainstream, comprehensive or inclusive. The language has become more strident, and quite frankly, scaremongering is commonplace. In a situation which is becoming increasingly overheated, we need to hear a voice of calm. We need to identify the fundamentals that we share in common, and to state the common basis on which our mutual trust can be rebuilt. ... Unless we can make a fresh statement clearly and basically of what holds us together, we are destined to grow apart.¹

So declared Drexel Gomez, Archbishop of the West Indies, to the General Synod of the Church of England in July 2007 when opening the debate about the proposed Anglican covenant. The Anglican Communion has now been in existence for a couple of centuries or more,² but it still does not know what it stands for. There is no agreed definition of the Anglican Communion; no concord on Anglican fundamentals; no consensus on what it means to be a loyal Anglican. In fact, the communion as presently organised lacks any form of theological coherence.³ This has become painfully obvious during our recent troubles, as the communion rapidly disintegrates. Our traditional Anglican polity is neither rigorous enough nor flexible enough to cope with the realities of the twenty-first century.

One gaping lacuna is the lack of any written agreement on how Anglican provinces should relate to each another. Although each province has its own canon law to govern its internal life, there are no legal procedures in place between provinces. An aggressively heterodox province like The Episcopal Church (USA) has therefore been able to exploit this gap, choosing 'to act as *antinomians* abroad but as *legalists* at home'.⁴ Their unshakable emphasis upon provincial autonomy has brought chaos in its wake. Can a solution be found? Perhaps a written covenant for the worldwide Anglican Communion is the way forward? The Global South primates, in particular, have championed this remedy. A draft has already been sketched out and is on the table for discussion. What are we to make of it, from an evangelical perspective?

This paper will argue that although the stated aims for an Anglican covenant are important to pursue, the current proposal is not the best way to proceed. It will outline four significant theological and ecclesiological weaknesses in the draft covenant, which urgently need to be addressed.

* I am grateful to the generosity of my friends, Andrew Goddard and Peter Walker, for subjecting earlier versions of this paper to vigorous and incisive critique. The opinions expressed here remain, of course, only mine.

¹ General Synod, July 2007.

² The earliest known reference to the term 'Anglican Communion' dates from 1847; Colin Podmore, *Aspects of Anglican Identity* (London, 2005), p. 36.

³ See further, Andrew Atherstone, 'The Incoherence of the Anglican Communion', *Churchman* 118 (Autumn 2004), pp. 235-255.

⁴ *Repair the Tear: The Windsor Report: An Assessment and Call for Action* (New Malden, 2004), p. 45.

How did we get here and where are we going?

After an emergency meeting of the primates of the Anglican Communion at Lambeth Palace in October 2003, the Archbishop of Canterbury set up the Lambeth Commission on Communion. Its pressing task was to find a way to handle the crisis precipitated by officially-sanctioned sexual immorality amongst Anglicans in North America – the blessing of same-sex unions in the Canadian diocese of New Westminster (Vancouver), and the consecration of a bishop in a same-sex partnership for the diocese of New Hampshire in the United States. One of the main proposals of the subsequent *Windsor Report* (2004) was the adoption of an Anglican covenant to ‘make explicit and forceful the loyalty and bonds of affection which govern the relationships between the churches of the Communion’.⁵ It saw six key advantages to such a covenant:

- an agreed mechanism for handling future disputes within the communion
- a focal point or ‘visible foundation’ around which Anglicans can gather
- an explanation of what Anglicanism is, to help confused ecumenical partners
- a restraint on unilateral action by individual provinces
- an opportunity for worldwide witness
- a sign of solidarity for Anglicans facing political pressure from secular governments.

These goals have been reformulated in a brief consultation document, *Towards an Anglican Covenant* (2006), under three headings:

- **relational** – to promote reconciliation amongst Anglicans, ‘helping to heal and strengthen the bonds of affections that have been damaged in recent years’
- **educational** – to deepen understanding of Anglican belief and history
- **institutional** – to prevent and resolve conflict within an agreed framework.⁶

These aims are difficult to elucidate. It is hard to decipher exactly what they mean. Although open to a variety of conflicting interpretations, this paper will nevertheless give the covenant aims the benefit of the doubt. If what they seek is order out of chaos, clarity of Anglican identity, restraint of unbiblical teaching and practice, explicit reaffirmation of the Christian faith and reinvigoration in evangelism then these are praiseworthy goals. It is on the basis of this hopeful interpretation that we shall judge the success of the proposed draft.

One of the vocal advocates for an Anglican covenant has been the Archbishop of Canterbury himself. For example, in November 2004, shortly after the *Windsor Report* was published, he urged his fellow primates:

I hope we will see virtue in this. No one can or will impose this, but it may be a creative way of expressing a unity that is neither theoretical nor tyrannical. We have

⁵ The Lambeth Commission on Communion, *The Windsor Report 2004*, paragraphs 117-120. The report laid out a possible form of covenant in Appendix 2.

⁶ *Towards an Anglican Covenant: A Consultation Paper on the Covenant Proposal of the Windsor Report*, March 2006.

experience of making covenants with our ecumenical partners; why should there not be appropriate commitments which we can freely and honestly make with one another?⁷

In June 2006 he reiterated:

... what our Communion lacks is a set of adequately developed structures which is able to cope with the diversity of views that will inevitably arise in a world of rapid global communication and huge cultural variety. The tacit conventions between us need spelling out – not for the sake of some central mechanism of control but so that we have ways of being sure we're still talking the same language, aware of belonging to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ.⁸

The archbishop imagines a possible situation where some provinces sign up to the covenant as 'constituent' churches in the Anglican Communion, while other provinces become 'churches in association', bound by historic and personal links but not officially part of the communion.⁹ More recently, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York have encouraged the Church of England's General Synod to support the covenant proposals:

... we have to recognize that there are some limits to Anglican 'diversity'. It is simply a matter of fact that some questions – not only the debates over sexual ethics – are experienced as fundamentally Church-dividing questions. It could be that a well-structured Covenant would help us *not* to treat every divisive matter with the same seriousness and enable us to discern what was really – theologically and ecclesially – at stake when disagreements arose. It is not a tool for promoting schism or canonizing heightened intolerance, but an element in the continuing work of handling conflict without easy recourse to mutual condemnation. ... we can't just appeal to some imagined traditional Anglican way of handling things without fuss.¹⁰

The *Windsor Report* envisaged the development of an Anglican covenant as a 'long-term process',¹¹ though progress has been surprisingly rapid. There has been widespread support for the idea across the communion – even the 2006 General Convention of The Episcopal Church (USA) welcomed a covenant which 'underscores our unity in faith, order, and common life in the service of God's mission'.¹² In January 2007 a Covenant Design Group (CDG) was announced, with a dozen members of diverse theological views, led by Archbishop Gomez. They met at Nassau in the Bahamas and quickly produced a draft, which was well-received by the primates at their gathering at Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania in February 2007. Each province has been urged to submit a response by the end of 2007, after which the CDG will revise their draft. Next the covenant will be submitted to the Lambeth Conference in July 2008, revised again, and a final version presented to the

⁷ Rowan Williams, Advent Pastoral Letter, November 2004.

⁸ Rowan Williams, 'The Challenge and Hope of Being an Anglican Today: A Reflection for the Bishops, Clergy and Faithful of the Anglican Communion', June 2006.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ 'The Anglican Covenant Proposal' (briefing paper for General Synod), July 2007, annex 1.

¹¹ *Windsor Report*, paragraph 118.

¹² Resolution A166 of the 75th General Convention of The Episcopal Church at Columbus, Ohio, June 2006.

Anglican Consultative Council (ACC-14) in 2009 before being sent back to the provinces for ratification. If the process survives that far, the plan is for primates to sign the covenant when mandated to do so by their provincial synods. The Church of England's General Synod has agreed to 'engage positively' in the process, at least at this stage.¹³

Suddenly a theoretical possibility is on the verge of becoming a reality. The covenant process, in the words of Andrew Goddard, is now 'the only poker game in town'.¹⁴ Or to express it another way, the Anglican leadership (including the Global South primates) have put all their eggs in this one basket. There is no Plan B in the public domain. Yet it will be immediately apparent that if the Lambeth Conference collapses then the high-speed covenant train will also crash off the rails. At the time of writing, it seems that the orthodox African bishops and their friends will boycott Lambeth until the heterodox North American bishops are disinvented. Therefore discipline of the recalcitrant North Americans must precede the covenant discussions. If everyone claiming the name 'Anglican' is invited to the covenant-drafting table, then the likely future of the process will be painful wreckage.

Some liberal Anglicans have been vehement in their opposition to the whole covenant concept, for fear that Anglicanism would become confessional and that radical liberalism would be excluded. Yet Anglicanism, rightly understood, has always been confessional with explicit doctrinal boundaries. At the General Synod in July 2007, Bishop Tom Wright challenged

the idea that classical Anglicans were into this tolerance and inclusivity of our contemporary sort – just think of Hooker and Jewell, just think of Laud and Cosin – they hammered out articles of belief, and liturgies and insisted on adherence to them. Let's not indulge in romantic fantasy about our past.¹⁵

If an Anglican covenant is to have teeth, it must be willing to exclude as well as include, and to take the risk of putting certain views off limits. This is the real sticking point – not whether there should be a covenant, but what it should contain. What articles of belief should be 'hammered out' for the contemporary church and will they be effective? Some evangelicals see few signs of hope. Melvin Tinker, for example, has prophesied that the covenant will be no better than an 'unstable gentleman's agreement' which falsely promises 'peace in our time' like the Munich Agreement of 1938.¹⁶ Likewise Robert Tong warns that the church is being led into 'a cul de sac'.¹⁷ Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali is more sanguine, hoping that a written Anglican covenant may turn out to be 'the first step in recovering our

¹³ General Synod, July 2007.

¹⁴ Andrew Goddard, 'The Anglican Covenant' (a briefing paper for EGGSS, the Evangelical Group on General Synod), July 2007.

¹⁵ General Synod, July 2007.

¹⁶ Melvin Tinker, 'Anglican Communion in Crisis: The Windsor Report – Solution or Part of the Problem?', *Churchman* 119 (Spring 2005), p. 34.

¹⁷ Robert Tong, 'How Would the Anglican Church of Australia Commit Itself to an Anglican Covenant?', in Peter G. Bolt, Mark D. Thompson and Robert Tong (eds), *The Faith Once For All Delivered: An Australian Evangelical Response to the Windsor Report* (Sydney, 2005), p. 59.

integrity'.¹⁸ Others have resolved simply to wait and see. Will it be 'a life-saver or a dead duck'?, wonders the new Bishop of Oxford.¹⁹

The CDG, of course, is optimistic about the task set before it, suggesting that we have arrived at a 'moment of opportunity' for the Anglican Communion²⁰ – an opportunity to define Anglicanism for generations to come. For that very reason, the content of the covenant is of supreme importance. A wrong step at this juncture will be difficult to undo. This paper will suggest that the covenant process is a golden opportunity for a radical rethink of our assumptions about Anglican identity. Rather than enshrine the *status quo* of contemporary Anglicanism (thus endorsing a theological agenda driven by a century of Lambeth Conference resolutions), we need to wrestle again with some basic questions about the nature of the gospel and the church. And we must not be afraid of the unsettling practical implications. What sort of Anglicanism do we require in the twenty-first century? In a spirit of 'positive engagement', this paper will highlight four significant theological and ecclesiological weaknesses in the CDG's current proposal – it is vague about the gospel; it dodges the presenting issue; it forgets the local church; and it relies upon the Archbishop of Canterbury. These vital questions need to be thoroughly re-examined, though they strike at the root of some of our cherished preconceptions about Anglicanism. We appeal to the CDG to amend the covenant accordingly.

1) The draft covenant is vague about the gospel

Archbishop Gomez explains that the Anglican covenant

... is not intended to define some sort of new Anglicanism, or to invent some new model of authority, nor to peddle a narrow or exclusive view of what Anglicanism is. It is intended to state concisely and clearly the faith that we have all inherited together, so that there can be a new confidence that we are about the same mission.²¹

But if it is the revival and restatement of historic Anglicanism we are after, why does the covenant downplay the Reformation formularies of the church in favour of recent pronouncements? The answer is not far to seek – these recent pronouncements are vague about the gospel and about the content of Anglicanism, thus maintaining the current doctrinal *status quo* which amounts to an unprincipled 'comprehensiveness'.

For example, Section 2 of the Nassau draft on 'Common Catholicity, Apostolicity and Confession of Faith' explains:

Each member Church, and the Communion as a whole, affirms:

- that it is part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, worshipping the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- that it professes the faith which is uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures as containing all things necessary for salvation and as being the rule and ultimate

¹⁸ General Synod, July 2007.

¹⁹ John Pritchard, *Ad Clerum*, July 2007.

²⁰ Report of the Covenant Design Group, January 2007.

²¹ General Synod, July 2007.

standard of faith, and which is set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation ...

- that, led by the Holy Spirit, it has borne witness [notice the past tense!] to Christian truth in its historic formularies, the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordering of Bishops, Priests, and Deacons
- our loyalty to this inheritance of faith as our inspiration and guidance under God in bringing the grace and truth of Christ to this generation and making him known to our societies and nations.

This affirmation is copied almost *verbatim* from the Preface to the Church of England's Declaration of Assent (Canon C 15), which came into force in September 1975. Although it has grown over the last thirty years into 'a defining text for the Church of England's identity',²² its insufficiencies are obvious. The Declaration and its Preface were not drawn up to give clear theological definition to the Church of England, but to do precisely the opposite – to blur the boundaries and legitimise the doctrinal chaos which had taken grip during the twentieth century. It replaced centuries of clerical subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles, after an aggressive liberal catholic campaign for their abolition. Admittedly the doctrine commission which drafted the Declaration and Preface included evangelical representatives, Jim Packer and Michael Green, but they settled for it as the best that was then politically possible, not as what evangelicals most desired.²³ What have the last thirty years taught us? Almost every clergyman, clergywoman and licensed lay minister in the Church of England has now made this Declaration at some point in their ministry, and yet theological and moral confusion abound. Despite some enthusiastic evangelical interpretations of the Preface and Declaration, empirical evidence suggests that it has merely enshrined lowest-common-denominator Anglicanism, where anything goes.

Why then import such a vague statement from the Church of England into a worldwide Anglican covenant? The Modern Churchpeople's Union would like to see the Preface and Declaration of Assent as the basis for relationship between Anglican provinces, because in their words, "Loyalty" is a commendably elastic term.'²⁴ But the Church of England's present-day theological latitude is a poor model, which the Anglican Communion would be wise to eschew rather than endorse. The covenant process provides an excellent opportunity to rethink and reaffirm the doctrinal content of historic Anglicanism. It is probably unrealistic to ask the CDG to lay out the Thirty-Nine Articles and require assent to them – after all, several provinces have never had the Articles as part of their constitutions.²⁵ But why should the architects of the covenant not draft a

²² Podmore, *Aspects of Anglican Identity*, p. 43.

²³ Michael Green, *Adventure of Faith: Reflections on Fifty Years of Christian Service* (Grand Rapids, 2001), pp. 295-298; J.I. Packer and R.T. Beckwith, *The Thirty-Nine Articles: Their Place and Use Today* (1984; second edition, London, 2006).

²⁴ Jonathan Clatworthy, Paul Bagshaw and John Saxbee, 'A Response to *The Draft Anglican Covenant ...* on behalf of the Modern Churchpeople's Union', May 2007. See also Jonathan Clatworthy and Paul Bagshaw, 'Towards an Anglican Covenant: A Consultation Paper on the Covenant Proposal of the Windsor Report', *Modern Believing* 48 (April 2007), pp. 4-25.

²⁵ Peter Toon, 'The Articles and Homilies', in Stephen Sykes, John Booty and Jonathan Knight (eds), *The Study of Anglicanism* (second edition, London, 1998), p. 152. For the important debate on the Articles at the 1968 Lambeth Conference, see James B. Simpson and Edward M. Story, *The Long Shadows of Lambeth X*

confessional statement for the modern church of equal theological rigour, catholic breadth and evangelical commitment? It can be done, if only the CDG will grasp this nettle.

While being vague about the Anglican Communion's commitment to the apostolic gospel, the draft covenant appears strangely doctrinaire about ritual. Inserted into the above 'confession of faith' is a statement about baptism and the Lord's Supper which follows the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1886-88 by insisting that in every Anglican church these sacraments will be 'ministered with the unfailing use of Christ's words of institution, and of the elements ordained by him'. At first sight this phrase appears innocuous, but it reveals the liturgical preoccupations of the nineteenth-century churchmen who drew up the Quadrilateral.²⁶ It has proved controversial, partly because its interpretation is uncertain. What do we mean when we subscribe to this phrase? On one reading, the insistence upon the *ipsissima verba* of Christ at the Lord's Supper points to a Tractarian doctrine of 'consecration' of the bread and wine through a precise formula. Likewise, the insistence upon 'the elements ordained by him' has often been interpreted as an obligatory use of fermented wine, in contrast to the grape juice used by many Nonconformist denominations.²⁷ The designers of the Quadrilateral considered these rules of key significance, but why repeat their Victorian minutiae in an Anglican covenant for the modern church? Is alcohol still to be considered a *sine qua non* of Anglicanism, even in these days of ecumenical rapprochement and liturgical inculturation?²⁸ Yes, the Quadrilateral is 120 years old. Yes, it has often been reaffirmed by Lambeth Conferences and has made a significant impact upon our Anglican identity. But it is not beyond challenge and should not be uncritically rehearsed in an Anglican covenant. One sure sign that a church has lost its sense of proportion, is vagueness about the content of the gospel and yet rigidity about liturgical canons.

Unfortunately, Section 4 of the Nassau draft, on 'Our Anglican Vocation', is equally nebulous about the gospel message. It declares:

We commit ourselves to answering God's call to share in his healing and reconciling mission for our blessed but broken and hurting world, and, with mutual accountability, to share our God-given spiritual and material resources in this task. In this mission, which is the Mission of Christ, we commit ourselves

1. to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God
2. to teach, baptize and nurture new believers
3. to respond to human need by loving service
4. to seek to transform unjust structures of society

(New York, 1969), pp. 144-147; *The Lambeth Conference 1968: Resolutions and Reports* (London, 1968), pp. 40-41, 82-83.

²⁶ See further, J. Robert Wright (ed.), *Quadrilateral at One Hundred: Essays on the Centenary of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral* (Cincinnati, 1988); Jonathan Draper (ed.), *Communion and Episcopacy: Essays to Mark the Centenary of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral* (Cuddesdon, 1988).

²⁷ For this interpretation, see for example, Graham Leonard, *To Every Man's Conscience* (London, 1968), p. 20; Edwin Morris, *The Lambeth Quadrilateral and Reunion* (London, 1969), pp. 9-10.

²⁸ For existing Anglican diversity, see Phillip Tovey, *Inculturation of Christian Worship: Exploring the Eucharist* (Aldershot, 2004), pp. 44-47, 137-138; Phillip Tovey, 'Inculturation: The Bread and Wine at the Eucharist', *Colloquium: Music, Worship, Arts* 3 (2006), pp. 67-74.

5. to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and to sustain and renew the life of the earth.

These so-called 'Five Marks of Mission' were developed by the Anglican Consultative Council between 1984 and 1990, and have been eagerly adopted by parishes and dioceses around the Anglican Communion as a handy 'checklist' for their mission activities.²⁹ One of the reasons for their popularity is that they are vague enough for Anglicans of every description to subscribe to them and pretend that they have a common mission. What is the 'kingdom of God'? What is the 'good news'? What is God's 'healing and reconciling mission'? The draft covenant refuses to tell us. No mention here of Jesus Christ and his power to save. No mention of his atoning death on the cross. No mention of our need to repent of sin and to accept Jesus as our only Saviour and King. No mention of the Holy Spirit's work in conviction and conversion and sanctification.

If we must look no further than recent Anglican pronouncements, Stephen Noll (vice-chancellor of Uganda Christian University)³⁰ suggests that the covenant be amplified by the classic definition of evangelism from the *Archbishops' Committee of Inquiry on the Evangelistic Work of the Church* (1918):

To evangelise is so to present Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit, that men shall come to put their trust in God through him, to accept him as their Saviour, and to serve him as their King in the fellowship of his church.³¹

This statement would be a step in the right direction, with its insistence that the good news demands a response. But it must be made explicit that Jesus Christ is the *only* Saviour. For an Anglican covenant to be of lasting value, it needs to make a clear and unequivocal affirmation of the apostolic gospel and the uniqueness of Christ.

2) The draft covenant dodges the presenting issue

Once again we must ask the question, what is the covenant aiming at? The *Windsor Report* explored the structures and inter-relationships of the communion, but left alone questions of sexual morality. Its stated goals for an Anglican covenant likewise avoid the issue. Therefore the Nassau draft is deliberately silent on this topic, following its terms of reference. But these terms are skewed.

How strange the silence sounds! It is clear to most observers that the cause of distress in the Anglican Communion today is not only disagreement over the juridical authority of the Lambeth Conference, or the value of provincial autonomy, or the role of the primates. One of the sharpest points of controversy is whether homosexual genital acts

²⁹ See further, *Bonds of Affection: Proceedings of ACC-6, Badagry, Nigeria, 1984* (London, 1985); *Mission in a Broken World: Report of ACC-8, Wales, 1990* (London, 1990); Eleanor Johnson and John Clarke (eds), *Anglicans in Mission: A Transforming Journey*, MISSIO Report to ACC-11, Dundee, Scotland, 1999 (London, 2000).

³⁰ Stephen Noll, 'An Evangelical Commentary on the Draft Covenant', 2007.

³¹ This definition was a starting point for the Church of England's more famous report on evangelism, *Towards the Conversion of England* (London, 1945). For a critique, see J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (London, 1961), ch. 3.

are holy in God's sight, or whether the only proper context for sex is lifelong marriage between one man and one woman. This is the presenting issue of the day, around which the current crisis revolves. If the Anglican covenant is to promote the spiritual health of the churches, then it must explicitly address the moral chaos now so prevalent amongst Anglicans in the West. The closest the Nassau draft comes to a moral statement is Section 3 on 'Our Commitment to Confession of the Faith', which begins:

In seeking to be faithful to God in their various contexts, each Church commits itself to uphold and act in continuity and consistency with the catholic and apostolic faith, order and tradition, biblically derived moral values and the vision of humanity received by and developed in the communion of member Churches ...

The Episcopal Church (USA) and the Anglican Church in Canada would probably be delighted to subscribe to such a statement! They seem convinced that their moral values are 'biblically derived' and are deliberately pursuing a 'vision of humanity' which chimes with their local secular context. Yet for the Anglican covenant to hold the communion together it needs openly to confront the propagation of sexual immorality. Resolution 1.10 of the 1998 Lambeth Conference is, of course, a good place to start. Such a statement would not make the covenant quickly out of date, as some fear, but permanently relevant. Sexual purity and holy living will always be a key concern for the Christian church. Today's presenting issue must be faced – for the sake of this and succeeding generations.

3) The draft covenant forgets the local church

We move from the vital areas of doctrine and morality to another weakness of the draft Anglican covenant – its ecclesiology. The covenant's understanding of 'church' is inspired more by Laudian and Tractarian theology than by the biblical teaching of the early Anglican Reformers. Here again the covenant process provides an excellent opportunity for a serious rethink of the current Anglican *status quo*.

A classic Anglican definition of church is given by Article 19 of the Thirty-Nine Articles, written partly to rebut the popular medieval assertion that 'the church' was a worldwide organisation, linked by bishops and centred on Rome.³² The Reformers put their emphasis somewhere else entirely, and declared:

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.

The draft covenant affirms that the Scriptures must be faithfully preached (though it is too shy to call them the 'Word of God') and the sacraments be rightly administered. But it forgets that the visible church is a congregation of faithful Christians. The word *ekklesia* means, of course, 'an assembly' and in the New Testament almost always refers to a local

³² See further, Paul D.L. Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers* (London, 1981).

gathering of believers. It is not a diocese, nor a national institution, nor a denomination.³³ Yet the proposed covenant understands ‘church’ in a different way. Its focus is upon national and international structures, bishops and synods, not upon local congregations and local believers. For example, Section 3 of the Nassau draft explains that each member ‘church’ (for which read ‘province’) commits itself to ‘ensure that biblical texts are handled faithfully, respectfully, comprehensively and coherently, primarily through the teaching and initiative of bishops and synods ...’ What about the role of local believers in studying the Scriptures, or of local pastors in faithfully preaching them? Likewise Section 4 on ‘Our Unity and Common Life’ begins:

We affirm the historic episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and people called of God into the unity of his Church and the central role of bishops as custodians of faith, leaders in mission, and as a visible sign of unity.

This is orthodox teaching so far as it goes (at least given a patient interpretation), but it is not evangelical ecclesiology nor classic reformed Anglicanism. Once again the covenant quotes the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, which states that the ‘historic episcopate, locally adapted’ is one of the four key characteristics of Anglican identity. But the phrase ‘historic episcopate’ is notoriously slippery and it is far from certain what the designers of the Quadrilateral meant by it. To many commentators it means a doctrine of ‘episcopal exclusivity’ – that bishops descended from the apostles in tactile succession are a vital part of any Christian church. Predictably, the Quadrilateral’s insistence upon bishops, especially in the hands of Anglo-Catholic interpreters, was a barrier to ecumenical relations for much of the twentieth century. Despite some hopeful signs like the *Appeal to All Christian People* by the 1920 Lambeth Conference, Anglicans in practice chased unity with unreformed episcopal denominations (like Roman Catholics, Old Catholics and Eastern Orthodox) while giving a cold shoulder to reformed non-episcopal denominations.³⁴ Anglican evangelicals have for a long time acknowledged that bishops function (usually) for the *bene esse* of the church. Bishops are a good and ancient invention, designed to promote the church’s spiritual health. But in the final analysis they are neither necessary nor central – they are not part of the church’s *esse* nor its *plene esse*.³⁵ Anglican bishops exist *jure humano* not *jure divino*. Where does the Nassau covenant stand on these issues? It appears to be biased towards the High Churchism of 1662, when the novel doctrine of ‘episcopal exclusivity’ broke into the Anglican fold, and towards the

³³ See further, Alan M. Stibbs, *God’s Church: A Study in the Biblical Doctrine of the People of God* (London, 1959); Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Leicester, 1995); ‘The Church, the Churches and the Denominations of the Churches’ in *D. Broughton Knox: Selected Works*, volume 2, *Church and Ministry*, edited by Kirsten Birkett (Sydney, 2003), ch. 10.

³⁴ See, for example, Andrew Atherstone, ‘Anglican Evangelicals, Old Catholics and the Bonn Agreement’, *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 97 (March 2007), pp. 23-47.

³⁵ The classic texts defending the *esse* and *plene esse* theories of episcopacy are Kenneth E. Kirk (ed.), *The Apostolic Ministry: Essays on the History and the Doctrine of Episcopacy* (London, 1946) and K.M. Carey (ed.), *The Historic Episcopate in the Fullness of the Church* (London, 1954). Both have long since been debunked.

ecclesiology of the Oxford Movement.³⁶ Likewise we wonder in what sense bishops are ‘a visible sign of unity’? This may be Cyprian of Carthage or Laud of Lambeth, but it is not the teaching of Scripture.

Here we concur with the protest of the Modern Churchpeople’s Union that if the draft covenant were to be ratified as it stands then ‘the voice of the laity would be utterly peripheral and rendered inaudible. ... To marginalise the laity in decision making would be to hobble the body of Christ, to undermine the faithful work of the people of God, and to diminish the quality of ecclesial life.’³⁷ The answer, however, is not to take authority away from the primates and give it to the Anglican Consultative Council, which is an unrepresentative international grouping weighted towards Western liberals. A better answer is to acknowledge the authority of local congregations to govern their own life – to give congregations permission to opt in or out of the Anglican covenant. Covenanting bishops would then provide pastoral oversight and accountability to covenanting congregations, for their *bene esse*. This would lead to radical realignment of congregations around the world – orthodox with orthodox, and heterodox with heterodox, rather than the current farcical situation of orthodox and heterodox congregations ‘united’ under one bishop. Perhaps what will emerge is two or more Anglican covenants, for two or more parallel Anglican Communion. Indeed this unsettling process has, *de facto*, begun. The monarchical episcopate is increasingly a thing of the past, and the covenant debate is an ideal time to ask hard questions about the sort of bishops Anglicans want in the twenty-first century. Let us not shy away from root and branch reform merely because the *status quo* seems safer or more predictable.

Once again we query whether the CDG has been given the right terms of reference. Why should the Anglican covenant be signed by primates on behalf of their provinces, and not by ministers on behalf of their congregations? The visible unity of the true church is seen not by a province gathered around its primate, or a diocese gathered around its bishop, but by congregations of Christian believers gathered around the Word of God. A communion of churches is a relationship between congregations, not between bishops or synods.

The practical problem is seen no more acutely than within the Church of England itself. Let us suppose, as seems likely, that the Global South primates and the North American primates officially part company, perhaps signing two rival covenants, and establishing two separate communions. Which way will the Church of England jump? Whatever decision our primate makes, half the congregations in the country will think he has made the wrong choice, and seek to transfer to the rival communion. If bishops sign on behalf of their dioceses, the same problem will present itself, because most dioceses in the Church of England are deeply divided theologically. Therefore, the best solution is for local ministers to sign the covenant on behalf of their congregations. This would be perfectly in keeping with the Reformation strand of traditional Anglican ecclesiology. An alternative solution, effecting the same realignment, would be for only primates or bishops to sign, but for congregations to be given the explicit freedom to choose the diocese or province to which they want to be attached. Either way, our assumptions about the need to preserve

³⁶ For a survey of Tractarian views on episcopacy, see Peter Toon, *Evangelical Theology 1833-1856: A Response to Tractarianism* (London, 1979), pp. 184-188; Peter Nockles, *The Oxford Movement in Context: Anglican High Churchmanship, 1760-1857* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 146-152.

³⁷ Clatworthy, Bagshaw and Saxbee, ‘A Response to *The Draft Anglican Covenant*’.

monolithic ‘national churches’ and geographical dioceses with impervious territorial borders must be exploded.

4) The draft covenant relies upon the Archbishop of Canterbury

In September 2005 the Anglican Church of Nigeria revised its constitution, deleting all references to ‘communion with the see of Canterbury’ and instead affirming that it is

in full communion with all Anglican churches, dioceses and provinces that hold and maintain the historic faith, doctrine, sacrament and discipline of the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church as the Lord has commanded in his holy word and as the same are received as taught in the Book of Common Prayer and the Ordinal of 1662 and in the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion.

Now, however, Nigeria and all other provinces will be asked to sign up to a covenant which enshrines the central role of the Archbishop of Canterbury in setting the limits of the Anglican Communion. This is a step backwards. He gives definition to the communion not through any teaching authority, but in his own person – at the most basic level, the only way to be part of the Anglican Communion is to be in communion with the archbishop. Here it seems, according to the draft covenant, we reach the irreducible core of what it means to be Anglican. But once again this institutional approach needs to be challenged. How much more important it is to submit to the gospel message before submitting to any particular bishop.

The Nassau draft emphasizes the key place of the four so-called ‘Instruments of Communion’ which ‘serve to discern our common mind in communion issues, and to foster our interdependence and mutual accountability in Christ’. It explains:

Of these four Instruments of Communion, the Archbishop of Canterbury, with whose see Anglicans have historically been in communion, is accorded a primacy of honour and respect as first amongst equals (*primus inter pares*). He calls the Lambeth Conference, and Primates’ Meeting, and is President of the Anglican Consultative Council. The Lambeth Conference, under the presidency of the Archbishop of Canterbury ... The Primates’ Meeting, presided over by the Archbishop of Canterbury ...

For a covenant to bind the Anglican Communion to the see of Canterbury is to lay up problems for the future. How will Anglicanism escape from its anachronistic Anglo-centrism if Canterbury is the key? Again the covenant debate gives us an opportunity to wrestle with some deeper questions. Why should Canterbury be always *primus inter pares*? Yes, he always has been so for centuries, but why should he be so still in the twenty-first century? Why should he be the one to preside over Lambeth Conferences, primates and ACC? What is the rationale? Canterbury as *primus* is the traditional arrangement, but it is not an inviolable Anglican essential. Why not, for example, ask the most senior primate to convene and chair these meetings? If this convention seems too precious to be abandoned immediately, then maintain it for the time being but do not write it into the covenant.

The practical problem with enshrining this *status quo* (however ancient) in an Anglican covenant is simply this – one day, the Archbishop of Canterbury himself or the province he represents may require censure. After all, if Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch and Rome have erred (Article 19), so may Canterbury. Then what will become of the covenant? What if the Church of England succumbs to heterodoxy and has to be banished from the communion? This scenario is not beyond the realms of realistic possibility, yet the Nassau draft protects the English Church forever from the reach of communion discipline because Canterbury is its primate. If the Anglican covenant, and therefore the Anglican Communion, is dependent upon one man (and his province) it is more likely to come crashing down.

Conclusion

In conclusion, is the concept of a written Anglican covenant a good one? Yes it is, and it may prove helpful in the long term. Are its aims achievable (as interpreted throughout this paper to include clarity of Anglican identity and a mechanism for restraining heterodoxy)? Yes they are, though the legal hurdles will be tortuous. Is a covenant necessary before action can be taken? No, it isn't. Gospel proclamation and communion discipline can take place immediately (under our present constitution, the ball is in the Archbishop of Canterbury's court, with his power to exclude the heterodox from the Lambeth Conference and primates meetings). Is the current Nassau draft the right way to proceed? Unfortunately, as this paper has attempted to show, it leaves much to be desired as it stands at present and major revision is necessary. We look for a covenant which gives clear definition to the content of the apostolic gospel; which tackles the presenting issue of sexual immorality; which pays heed to local congregations; and which does not rely upon the Archbishop of Canterbury.

If Anglicanism is to be defined for generations to come, let us be sure to get the definition right – which means a confident reaffirmation of biblical theology and morality, and a radical rethink of Anglican ecclesiology. The covenant process offers a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to revitalize the Anglican vision, but it will miss the mark if it merely enshrines the existing *status quo*. Our basic assumptions about what it means to be Anglican need to be vigorously challenged. In particular, popular preconceptions about doctrinal comprehensiveness and the nature of episcopal government need to be scrutinized and overhauled.

So let us continue to pray for and engage with the primates, ecclesiastical politicians and covenant drafters as they look for an international and organisational solution to the communion's woes. And meanwhile let us persevere with fresh enthusiasm in praying, preaching and working for a spiritual reformation at the grassroots of Anglican life, which is where true revival begins.

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