

## The Saint Andrew's Covenant: A Preliminary Analysis

Great hope may be derived from the intention of the St. Andrew's Covenant (hereafter referred to as "the Covenant"). As in the history of the Church throughout the ages, the Church of Jesus Christ has grown in her knowledge of God and correspondingly of herself, so it is now. In my view, the Anglican Communion has the opportunity with this Covenant to grow in maturity as a church, both reaching out in charity across the boundaries of the national churches and working together to strengthen the unity of the church's understanding of her faith and practice.

From the initial period of the Ecumenical Councils and the Canonization of the Holy Scriptures, through the Christian Roman Empire and the profound piety of the monastic movement, through the establishment of Christian schools and universities, the Church's eventual reformation, and the subsequent period of Christian missionary activity and the establishment of national churches, the Holy Ghost has led the Body of Christ deeper and more fully into the Truth and Charity which is the Life of the Triune God.

So too now, the Anglican Communion finds itself at a watershed which may move the church towards a more profound unity and common life, if the terms of this covenant that would bind its adherents in a commitment of the bonds of affection is finally formalized.

And within our particular development of the historic Christian Church, we should remember that from the beginning of the church's life, in imitation of her Lord, each successive age could not have realized its calling apart from the witness of Christian martyrs. The church's life in her spiritual depth is unthinkable apart from the actual sacrifice of love. Even now there is the call of great sacrifice within the Bride of Christ herself, a call to persevering patience amidst the conflict between those who feel they follow a prophetic demand to change some aspects of the moral theology of the church and those who believe that they are themselves the guardians of a moral theology which cannot be compromised. The Covenant is an attempt to live out this charity, living faithfully by the formative principles of Christianity, and in confident hope that the Spirit will indeed cleanse the thoughts of our hearts through understanding, prayer, and action.

I believe this moment in the life of the Anglican Communion offers the hope of continuity within the growth of the Body of Christ in space and time.<sup>1</sup> Our age is no different from any other in the challenges of faith and

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<sup>1</sup> The "Introduction to the Anglican Covenant" itself speaks of this place and identity of the Anglican Communion in the history of the Christian Church (paragraph 4).

practice which have come to be both within and without the church. And yet it is because of lessons already learned that we may proceed now with hope. By reason of this Covenant, we can proceed as a church, by means of: a) a common understanding of the first principles of our faith; b) a firm hope, following our faith, which expects the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth as He has done in the past; and c) a commitment to charity to live in the truth of Christ, in repentance, obedience, and joy.

I offer this analysis and these few suggestions in the hope of contributing to the process of crafting this Covenant.

The categories of my analysis are these: (1) first principles: the Anglican *esse*; (2) autonomy and communion; (3) interdependence: a common mind and heart; (4) theological and ecclesiastical presuppositions.

### **1. First Principles and the Anglican *Esse***

The Covenant begins with a definitively catholic Christian identity. Its authority stems from the canonical Holy Scriptures, the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, and the ancient sacred order of Bishops. In this way the Covenant binds its intention: (a) to the revelation of God in Scripture – received and confirmed by its canonization in the church, (b) to the theological understanding of that self-same Scripture articulated in the Creeds, and (c) to the proclamation, discipline, and defense of the gospel, vouchsafed to the church as a whole by her Bishops through the centuries.

These first principles, therefore, form the foundation of the Covenant. It is a necessary beginning, if the Church be truly faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ who speaks at the center of the biblical revelation, and whose own identity is given a definitive understanding in the Creeds and in the teaching of the Apostles and their successors. Indeed, it is with the definitive understanding of Jesus Christ that the doctrine of the Trinity comes fully into view, and we find ourselves humbly grateful to acknowledge and participate in the life of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. It is this participation (*koinonia*)<sup>2</sup> that brings the life of God in all its fullness to the church.

All the precious doctrines of faith and of practice in the Church grow out of this beginning. To depart from these first principles, or to revise them so as to alter their form and content, would be for the church to move away

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<sup>2</sup> I John 1: 3, Matthew 28: 18-20, and the "Introduction," (paragraph 1).

from her authority as the inheritor of the truth and love of the one Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, leaving the church an unstable foundation destined to erode beneath the changing tides of worldly opinion and ideology. To keep these first principles assures the church that she is built upon the stability of eternal truth, spoken to her by the eternal Word Himself, and remembered and understood through the abiding presence and teaching of the Holy Ghost. Only with Jesus Christ as the head corner stone, and with the teaching of the Prophets and the Apostles preserved in Holy Scripture, does the church remain a living structure, able to affirm and profess her Creeds as the true and life-giving knowledge of the Triune God, Whom the church seeks by the living reality of faith.

On the firm foundation of these first principles, the Anglican Communion takes her place in the historic Christian Church through her distinctive formularies. The 1662 Book of Common Prayer, the 1662 Ordinal, and the Thirty-nine Articles of the Christian Religion embody what the Covenant refers to as a “significant witness” to the Communion’s catholicity. In this way these formularies form the Anglican *esse*, binding her to other Christian catholic churches *and* distinguishing her from the same churches. The Covenant’s declaration that the Anglican formularies are a “significant witness” means that Anglicanism bears witness through the continuity of this particular *signum* – this articulated symbol of the Christian faith - which by virtue of her place in history renders the Anglican *signum* both catholic and reformed. Here Anglicanism takes her distinctive place in the growth of the Body of Christ, offering to the world a fruitful perspective on the rich and sometimes difficult history of the Holy Spirit’s witness to Jesus, the one Lord and Savior. Moreover, this Anglican *esse*, this *signum*, abides as the root and genesis of subsequent prayer book revision and catechetical exposition. The articulation of this “significant witness” within the Covenant shows that as the national churches themselves seek to reaffirm their unanimity of mind, they will need to embrace the distinctive formularies of Anglicanism more and more as a standard and guide for all subsequent doctrinal discussion, debate, forbearance, and mutual love.<sup>3</sup>

It must be acknowledged, therefore, that for any of the signers of this covenant to take a stand outside of these historic formularies (which are based themselves on the first principles of the Christian faith), would be to jeopardize the very understanding by which a common mind may be formed and by which mutual charity may be experienced. The crafters of the

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<sup>3</sup> The “Introduction,” (paragraph 5): “... we recognize the importance of renewing our commitment to one another, and our common understanding of the faith as we have received it in a solemn way, so that the ‘bonds of affection’ which hold us together may be affirmed.”

Covenant have exercised great wisdom in recognizing the “significant witness” of the historic Prayer Book, Ordinal, and Articles. I believe their significance in the body of the Covenant itself should be increased to conform to the acknowledgement of their profound importance in the “Introduction.”

## 2. Autonomy and Communion

As the “Commentary” states, the section of the Covenant which attempts to draw together both the autonomy of the national churches and their interdependence is perhaps the most difficult.<sup>4</sup> The Covenant has adopted the text on this subject (3.1.2) from the primates’ statement of Dar es Salaam.<sup>5</sup> The intention in the Covenant is to recognize and respect the local construction and administration of ecclesial law and governance while proclaiming the “mutual affection, commitment and service” called forth and enabled by the Holy Spirit. The Covenant intends that in order to realize the calling and power of the Holy Spirit in the common mind and life of the national churches, the national churches should look to the work of the Instruments of Communion. What the Covenant seeks here is an inherent authoritative voice, reflective of the diversity of the national churches, which will work towards unanimity of thought and action.

While the voice of the primates must always be heard and reflected upon in order to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit, we must remember that the Instruments of Communion, whether taken together or in their several parts, cannot be used by their constituents in such a way that contradicts the *first principles* on which the Covenant is founded. In this way it should be stated and recognized that the Instruments of Communion depend themselves for their authority upon the very principles on which the Covenant is based.

Furthermore, with respect to the idea of “autonomy in communion,” it should be acknowledged and emphasized first of all that, theologically speaking, no absolute autonomy exists within the Christian church. The church is the Bride of Christ, his own mystical Body, in whom all churches find their alpha and omega, and whose authority and saving mercy cannot be diminished or contravened. Second, because the Constitutions and Canons of a given church constitute the mind of that church, even the several sets of Constitutions and Canons that exist in their several churches throughout the

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<sup>4</sup> “Commentary to the St Andrew’s Draft,”; “The Commitments in 3.2”.

<sup>5</sup> “Commentary,” clause 3.2.2.

Anglican Communion cannot be said to be autonomous, given that their authority of faith and practice, church order, and sacramental life all depend upon the veracity and supremacy of Holy Scripture.<sup>6</sup> The fact that “Each church, episcopally led and synodically governed, orders and regulates its own affairs”<sup>7</sup> can only mean that with respect to rites and ceremonies and local jurisdiction each church is free to make its own way, but with respect to doctrines of faith and moral practice, each church remains bound to the teaching and moral life articulated in the Holy Scripture and vouchsafed to us in the Creeds and the historic formularies<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, unless we maintain the identity of our Catholic tradition articulated in the Creeds and the historic formularies, we cannot be said in any meaningful way to share in one *communion*. It is only when our various Constitutions and Canons embody and employ our catholic identity that we may be said to participate in one *koinonia* with the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost.

I would suggest, therefore, that the committee dispense with the notion of autonomy and replace it with *relative autonomy* by which the Covenant can bring the relations of the national churches and their governmental integrity into explicit agreement with their catholic identity in its Anglican ethos. In this way the actual governance of the several national churches in their rites and ceremonies and jurisdiction are affirmed while the bond of the national churches within the life giving Word of the Lord Jesus Christ is left supreme.

### **3. Interdependence: a common mind and heart**

The Covenant intends for the national churches of the Anglican Communion to adhere to the Covenant in a spirit of conscious and mutual self- submission, manifesting diligent patience and steadfast co-operation.<sup>9</sup> What is of the utmost importance here is the *cultivation* of trust and mutual submission by the recognition once again of the first principles of the Covenant. Holy Scripture, the Creeds, the historic formularies of the Anglican branch of the Church Catholic, and the sacred order of Bishops who defend these, are the objective standards of the church’s mind. The Covenant and the Instruments of the Communion that will be responsible for

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<sup>6</sup> See p. V of the “Preface” to the Book of Common Prayer of PECUSA, 1789, where it is declared that in the worship of Christ “different forms and usages may without offense be allowed, provided the substance of the Faith be kept entire.”

<sup>7</sup> St Andrews Covenant 3.1.2.

<sup>8</sup> I take up the historic formularies here simply because the Creeds do not themselves articulate anything about the Lord’s Supper (or other sacraments besides Baptism) or Holy Orders in the Church.

<sup>9</sup> Ephesians 5:21: “submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of Christ.”

implementing the provisions of the Covenant have these first principles as the bedrock on which mutual trust can be built. If this be so, then the good will to follow the guidance of the Instruments of Communion may be strong. The bonds of affection, the actual exercise of charity, shall then be able to accept, respectfully, the labor and forbearance and perseverance needed to address the difficulties that face the church. Without the first principles as the theological, ecclesiastical, and pastoral ground of the church's judgment and action, the bonds of affection, mutual respect, and hope itself will be impossible to achieve.

It follows, therefore, that with such a commitment of trust, there must be a thorough understanding of the Covenant on the part of all the churches. How the Covenant itself depends upon the formative principles of Christianity, and how the Covenant depends upon the same formative principles for its distinctive identity as Anglican, both catholic and reformed, is the necessary foundation for the building of our particular branch of the Church Catholic in truth and love.

Furthermore, in order for such a perspective on the first principles of the Covenant to establish trust throughout the national churches, each national church will need to understand and affirm the necessity of those principles not only in relation to other churches but in relation to itself, its own provinces, dioceses, seminaries, parishes, clergy and laity. The meaning and establishment of the Covenant in a common mind and common heart of the church of Jesus Christ requires this fullness of understanding and commitment of good will in its every part, in all the church's institutions, and through successive generations, if it is to bind us, not merely as an institution, but as the Body of Christ. It is in this way that a common mind and a common heart become reality.

#### **4. Theological and Ecclesiastical Presuppositions**

Finally, I would propose that the entire enterprise of the Covenant has been forged rightly, and with every intention of goodness, through the spiritual energy of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. The first principles have to do with what we believe to be true about the Lord Jesus Christ and his church. Our life together as Anglicans, lived in the relations of the national churches and in relation to other Christian churches and committed to mission in and for the whole world, issues from the hope of the power of the gospel of the same Lord. And our unity and commitment

to make our way together on our spiritual journey stems from the binding motion of charity, which is nothing other than the very being of God.

These same theological virtues are implicit in the structure of this Covenant: “Our inheritance of Faith;” “The Life we share with Others: our Anglican Vocation;” and “Our Unity and Common Life.” It seems to have been so crafted in these virtues, not so much by design of the document itself, but by the design of him whose grace has enlivened the Christian church to believe in and to hope for and to love each inkling of his presence and every operation of his tender mercy.

Overall, I find this an immensely hopeful document, the kind of thing that the Anglican Communion truly needs, and which is almost at hand. My analysis has really only touched on two points having to do with the first part of the Covenant and with the second and third combined. I hope this preliminary analysis contributes to the process. If faith, hope, and charity are indeed the formative virtues in the formalization of this effort, then our communion shall reap the benefits of a decisive moment in the history of Anglicanism and of the entire Christian Church. All of which we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Respectfully submitted,

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