

Thoughts on the Prospects of an Anglican Covenant: To Hold and Lead

Clyde Glandon, DMin, AOJN

The emergence of the idea of an Anglican Covenant has come in the past few years as the Communion seeks to address the question of mutuality between the various provinces around the world.

I am writing as I continue to hear expressions of misgivings among fellow Episcopalians here in the Diocese of Oklahoma about an Anglican covenant. Some of these expressions are rather more negative-sounding than the word “misgivings” seems to imply.

Some are arguing that the concept of a covenant is not really true to the spirit and tradition of Anglican Christianity. I want to raise a point for us to consider. The point may not be entirely welcome, but I think we need to ponder and perhaps struggle with it.

In this Diocese we have made the baptismal covenant part of our mission statement. We cite this commitment as a basis in many of our dialogues about inclusiveness, the spirituality beneath our commitments and actions, as well as an important basis for our polity. I make this argument myself. That the baptismal covenant is grounded in the baptismal reality of our union with God, which is in turn grounded in the unity of the Trinity itself which places community at the ontological core of reality.

At the same time we are paying close attention to the question of the blessing of same sex marriages. Such blessings are in the context of the tradition of marriage vows and a covenantal relationship.

The point I am making is that I am puzzled about why the concept of a covenant, *per se*, is thought to be something which is not especially foundational to Anglican and Episcopal Christianity. Especially since we who advocate inclusiveness rely so heavily upon this concept in the baptismal covenant.

My sense is that the spirituality, the theology, and the polity of our Anglican tradition, as well as Christian tradition in general, is indeed deeply invested in covenantal ideas. *I think that it applies in every direction and at every level.* The entire tradition, as I see it, in the Hebrew experience and in the “New” covenant of the Jesus experience, as well as in the history of Christianity in successive centuries, seems to illustrate this dynamic.

There is the argument that a covenant at the international level of the Anglican Communion would impede or violate the autonomy of the various provinces. I don’t hear any one arguing that it is important not to restrict the autonomy of those who want to receive a blessing for their relationship, of marriage or a union. Indeed, if someone argued that “it is not part of our polity” to allow such a restriction on each participant’s autonomy by blessing a union covenant, I think that person would be accused of conservative dissimulation and pettifoggery.

We come again to the spirit and the letter of the law and the question of over-legalization of the covenant idea.

I assume we are seeking to honor the spirit of the baptismal covenant when we make strong social commitments to inclusiveness. That we are seeking a social realization of what we believe is the community of the Divine, so that it flows into our social relationships, in this case with gay and lesbian persons. That is, both as it applies in our church life, and in the covenantal relationships which any couple seeks to have blessed in the Church.

There may be a sense that there is some important difference between the idea of covenant at the blessings-of-unions level, as well as at the Baptismal level, and the idea of covenant at the Provincial level. I am not clear what the difference is. That is, am I not just as bound to the Anglicans in Nigeria—with whom I have a great deal of difficulty maintaining the bond of peace, or even civility—as I am to gay and lesbian people with whom I am in communion?

Yes, we may understandably adopt a hermeneutic of suspicion in regard to motives for seeking to craft an Anglican covenant. But I don’t think such a hermeneutic is one of our better angels. Speaking of “better Angels” of our nature, Abraham Lincoln’s famous reference, where does this covenant idea take us as it relates to the United States? Emphasis *United*. In the antebellum South, “States rights” seemed to be the argument against restricting the autonomy of the states, in this case in regard to slavery. The political unity of the nation, as well as the moral commitments in regard to slavery, ended up carrying the day as a result of the Civil War.

Elizabeth imposed the Elizabethan Settlement. Lincoln imposed the union. We are asked to adopt a voluntary “Elizabethan Settlement” now.

What is the “bond of peace”? Is it a form of “bondage”? How is the bond of peace different than an Anglican covenant which seeks to express it? We successfully placed the Baptismal covenant in our Diocesan mission statement. Was this over-legalizing it? Committing us to restrictions on our autonomy? Yes, and No. “I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity, the powers of nature, the power of God to hold and lead.” The aspiration in this song is a freely-chosen, fierce desire to bind oneself.

Vows and covenants are indeed restricting of our autonomy. Yet we enter into them, apparently, because we think they are extremely important. What covenants are we prepared to bless?

I repeat that the spirit of the baptismal covenant applies in every direction and at all levels. I am not sure there is a significant difference between local mission and world-wide provincial polity. This is very difficult, like a cross. Julian of Norwich uses the term “even Christians.” The cross and our baptism make us even Christians. I think this

is the difference between a Church and a sect. A Church, yes a broken Church to use Michael Ramsey's words, in which all are "even" because all have died in Baptism.

I close by musing out loud about the icon the Oklahoma William White Intercessory Community is planning to give Katherine Jefferts Schori when she is here on September 14-16. It is an image of Hilda of Whitby, vested as a bishop, carrying a crosier in one hand and the Church in the other. It is a deeply ambivalent witness from the Christian past. On the one hand the Celtic Christian tradition of perhaps the best gender culture in Christian history: full political, spiritual, and social authority of women sharing power with men, based in part in the Brehon laws of pre-Christian Ireland. On the other, Hilda chose to turn a corner toward the Romanization and Latinizing of the Church, making for ecclesiastical peace. A costly peace, as any one knows who has come to find the ancient friend of Celtic Christianity lying patiently as a hidden stream beneath Roman and later English culture of the succeeding centuries. Even this generation of Episcopal clergy is only rediscovering—often one person at a time-- this rich, but hidden thread of "native," indeed aboriginal Christianity, perhaps in her own blood and in the "basement" of her psyche.

Suzanne Schleck, the artist who wrote this icon, has placed, as she does on others of her icons, a text running round the perimeter of the image. In this case the icon of Hilda holds the following scriptural words: *I beg you to make every effort to hold the spirit of unity in the bond of peace.*

When I ordered the icon, I could not make out the words, but felt the image of Hilda as bishop, holding the church, was excellently apt as a gift for Bishop Schori. The words are, of course, momentarily relevant at this time, and ironic in their meanings both in the 7th century and now. Anglicanism itself made a different choice, away from Rome, in the 16th and 17th Centuries. It has still sought, in F. D. Maurice, William Temple, Michael Ramsey, and Rowan Williams to pursue a vocation between the institutional fundamentalism of Rome and the scriptural fundamentalism of large portions of Evangelicalism. The *via media* is not a curiosity of character for local Episcopalians to rediscover in dusty books; it is a huge historical vocation, rooted in Chalcedon, rooted in the incarnation.

Julian taught us that the Lord is the foundation of our prayer. Just as, mentioned above, the foundation of such unity as is manifest, lies not only in Baptism, but in the One who holds all things, the Community within all things. In this sense I say what I have been saying for some years now: the history of the Church makes mystics of us all. That is, how else to believe in peace when it is not visible? We become involuntarily apophatic. And in another sense, that it is perhaps only in prayer, in meditation, in intercession, in Eucharist, that we can "hold"—by being held-- the existing and possible further disunity of the Church.