

## A Confessional Communion?

I'd like to begin what I have to say with a few comments of detail about this St Andrews Draft Covenant, and then offer some reflections about the project to establish a covenant as a whole.

Scripture

First, I welcome the way that Scripture is used in this document. The Commentary which follows the Draft Covenant notes that the initial draft had been criticised for its rather sideways use of scripture. The Church in Wales response was one of the provincial responses which made this point. There is a much better and clearer engagement with scripture in this draft as a result of that critique.

It was some years ago now that James Barr made a good comment about the use of scripture in official church documents. I seldom used to find myself agreeing with James Barr, but he had a point on this. He noticed how the Bible is often brought in at the beginning of a church report to provide a bit of window dressing or garnish, like the sprig of parsley next to the paté on your plate. But it then gets thrown away. The report moves on regardless of whatever the scriptural passages prefacing it might have said. That is a trap which the St Andrews Draft Covenant avoids.

In 1.1.2 the Draft Covenant says some important and good things about the place of Scripture in the life of the church. And in 1.2.4 it says some important things about theological method in the use of Scripture.

Trinity

Secondly I was pleased to see what it said about the life of God the Holy Trinity. Or, more accurately, I was pleased by what it *didn't* say.

For most of Christian history the Holy Trinity has been a sublime mystery – ‘the Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible’ as the Athanasian Creed puts it. But suddenly in recent years we seem to have discovered we were wrong. Not only is the Holy Trinity comprehensible, but so transparently comprehensible that the life of the Trinity can be a model for the life of the church. And when speaking on the subject if you can use the word *perichoresis* you can sound profound and if you can refer to a ‘dance’ you can also be trendy and contemporary!

Some presentations of this subject have almost seemed to say: ‘Hey, if the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit can manage to rub along together somehow, well shucks folks, surely we should be able to as well’.

That’s another trap this draft Covenant avoids.

Success The *third* preliminary point I’d like to make is to draw attention to something which the draft Covenant refers to in 2.1.1. And that is that the problems we are discussing today are essentially problems generated by *success*.

If the Church of England had remained a national church rooted in England, with smaller sisters in Wales and Ireland and a slightly awkward cousin in Scotland, then we wouldn’t be here today. It is the huge growth of Anglicanism in diverse cultures and following the colours of diverse missionary endeavours which has made the unity of the whole thing problematic. But if I were asked whether I would rather be part of an insular but stable church or of a vibrant growing world-wide communion – I’d rather be part of the latter, for all its problems. And I would guess that would be true for most of us, too.

Covenant Now, to considering the Draft Covenant itself.

Teeth One way to come at this would be to treat it like a horse and look at its teeth first. This are located in 3.2.5 and particularly the rather wobbly molar represented by 3.2.5e. Plenty of people have taken a good look at that and at the phrase ‘Any such request [from an Instrument of Communion to take action] would not be binding on a Church unless recognised as such by that Church’. One slightly acid commentator headlined this as ‘Making heterodoxy safe for future generations’. The fear he was expressing was that particular provinces could redefine their faith and practice and could rebut any questioning of such moves simply by declaring that they do not recognise a request (from whichever Instrument it might come) as binding on themselves.

Some have been concerned that too much power is vested in the Archbishop of Canterbury by the processes described in the Draft Procedural Appendix (that is a question of confidence – how much can one person be expected to carry that weight of responsibility?). Others have been worried by the overarching power apparently given to the ACC in section 8 of the Draft Procedural Appendix (that’s a question of

power – some people perceive the ACC as the most responsive of all the Instruments to white Western liberalism).

We have heard today that the Primates are deeply committed to a model of autonomy-in-communion. It is small wonder. After all, no Vicar likes any colleague telling him what to do in his parish, either. The Anglican Communion has developed a structure rather like the Spar retailing enterprise: a kind of franchise where shopkeepers own their own business, but have the benefit of a recognisable brand name on their shop front and a lot of freedom in running their outlet. They would not want to become merely managers of a store which is just part of a chain, taking orders from people higher up the structure. Would it be too cynical to see primatial embrace of autonomy-in-communion as less a theological commitment, and more a very understandable human preference for freedom of action?

The difficulty is that someone, somewhere, has to exercise some authority. It reminds me of something I heard the late Bp Stephen Neill once say, about drafting the constitution of a new Province (as I recall, one of the E African provinces), ‘We gave them an almost perfect constitution: the Bishops have virtually unlimited authority – and practically no power at all!’

Purpose But I’ve been billed on the programme as considering ‘a confessional Communion?’ so I’d better do something to justify my billing. And rather than look at details I would like to consider a criticism made on the conservative American ‘Stand Firm’ website by Matt Kennedy soon after the draft was released:

The fundamental weakness of the Covenant, as many have pointed out, has been the decision not to push for an agreement on theological foundations as either a part of the Covenant document itself or as a necessary corollary to it. As it stands the Covenant is simply a way of relating. It is a structure founded on a process that exists for the sake of the structure. There is no “there” there. The established, structured, process is its own reason for being.

There seems to be an odd implicit trust on the part of the design team that so long as various provinces of the Communion remain tied together structurally and abide by a certain process of relating to one another when disputes arise, that the basic health of the body will be retained, as if "community" is an end in itself.

Descriptive  
or  
Prescriptive

I mention this comment because it echoes concerns which I articulated in a piece I wrote initially to try to sort my own thoughts out, but which I discovered recently has made its way onto the Anglican Communion website. I feel that I know now how Jude must have felt when they decided to canonise his epistle. Who'd have thought it? A key question about the concept of a covenant concerns what it is intended to achieve:

[Is it] intended as *descriptive*: is it a kind of umbrella which comfortably covers everything currently called 'Anglican' without excluding anyone who wants to be 'in'? Or is it intended to be *prescriptive*: is it meant to offer a kind of identification guide which enables the observer to tell whether a particular manifestation of faith or life can or cannot be called 'Anglican'?

Some people have criticized the whole notion of a Covenant as something alien to the hospitable spirit of Anglicanism. The Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission had this to say:

[A Covenant is proposed] not in order to bind us to *new, strange and unhelpful obligations*, but rather to set us free both from disputes which become damaging and dishonouring and from the distraction which comes about when, lacking *an agreed method*, we flail around in awkward attempts to resolve them. This is not seeking to introduce *an alien notion into an Anglicanism which has never thought like this before*. (IATDC Response 1.10-11)

The IATDC goes on to say that a merely descriptive Covenant will not meet the needs of the Communion (2.2). But this Commission goes on to call for a covenant which focuses on process and is essentially a means of maintaining relationships.

I would agree with Stephen Noll of the Uganda Christian University, who wrote in his response to the working papers on an Anglican Covenant:

Of course, a covenant is relational by definition, but relations are based on convictions . . . Any covenant that promotes "relationships" apart from obligations of faithfulness to the authority of Scripture and to classic doctrine will be sentimental and ineffective.

Continental  
Drift

In other words, Anglicanism as it has become is an archipelago of islands which a kind of continental drift is inexorably moving farther apart. Trying to build a rope bridge from one island to the next is not going to create a united block of land. 'Listening' and 'dialogue' will not and cannot reverse the drifting apart of disparate forms of Anglicanism, because there is radical disagreement about the nature of authority, the sources of doctrine, the shape of the gospel and a hundred and one other things. This is not some silly misunderstanding brought about by a failure to listen to one another. These divergences go deep – deep enough to represent a continental drift which pulls us apart.

Archbishop Barry has already referred to this aspect of matters in his introductory address to us. He has suggested that the drift is not as serious as some of us imagine it to be: after all, as he reassured us, the group which reported to the Primates on The Episcopal Church's compliance with Windsor gave that church a 'pass'. The trouble is that many people around the Communion regarded that group as a generous marker. The fear which numerous people now harbour is that the interminable commissions, reports and conferences of the past few years are not preparations for action but substitutes for it, or even that they have become a ploy to *prevent* it.

How then do we address the continental drift? What drives it? How could a covenant make any difference?

A Covenant  
which  
challenges  
rather than  
embraces  
modernity

Once again I'd like to quote Stephen Noll. In an address given in January 2006 under the title 'The Global Anglican Communion – A Blueprint', Professor Noll spoke about the Reformation and about the birth of the Church of England as a distinct Christian voice. He noted the way in which the English reformers 'identified their own day as a God-appointed time to reiterate the biblical faith in contemporary terms'. He went on:

We are at another historic moment when the Church must articulate its faith in the light of modern and postmodern developments both outside itself and within. But, I would also argue, because the rot of modernity has eaten its way into the infrastructure of Anglicanism, especially in the West, we cannot reconstruct authentic Anglican doctrine unless we go back to the sources, namely to the Thirty-Nine Articles and Book of Common Prayer.

I find that Stephen Noll has been thinking along similar lines to the ones I outlined in my assessment of the Church in Wales submission on the Draft Covenant, only he has thought a great deal more and to rather better effect. So I lean on him substantially to fill out the outline thoughts I put forward in my ‘assessment’.

**Building blocks of a Covenant**

What then would be the building blocks of a Covenant which meets the challenge of our theological continental drift?

For one thing, it cannot simply be a superficial agreement to agree to disagree and celebrate our diversity. That has always struck me as a classic symptom of the weakness of Anglicanism – Anglican apologists can sometimes sound like the captain of a ship which has lost power, drifting on whatever currents push it along, running aground on a random section of coast and then proclaiming to the crew that this is precisely where they always intended to be, and it is in fact the best bit of coast anyway!

**1. A commitment to the primary authority of scripture**

The first such block must be *a commitment to scripture*. Here the St Andrews Draft Covenant (1.1.2) draws helpfully from the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, to speak of ‘the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as containing all things necessary for salvation [a reference back to Article VI] and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith’.

Here the draft Covenant also follows declarations of Lambeth 1998. In Resolution III.1, the Conference “reaffirms the primary authority of the Scriptures, according to their testimony and supported by our own historic formularies.” In Resolution III.5, “The Authority of the Holy Scriptures,” it likewise “affirms that our creator God, transcendent as well as immanent, communicates with us authoritatively through the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments; and in agreement with the Lambeth Quadrilateral, and in solidarity with the Lambeth Conference of 1888, affirms that these Holy Scriptures contain ‘all things necessary to salvation’ and are for us the ‘rule and ultimate standard’ of faith and practice.”

This has to mean something. It means, surely, that our view of God and the world will be different from what it would be if we did not acknowledge ‘the primary authority of the Scriptures’.

2. The place of the historic formularies

The *second building block* of a Covenant based on conviction rather than relationship will be the historic formularies. Here the St Andrews Draft Covenant mentions, in the same paragraph as the Scriptures, that the faith revealed in the Scriptures ‘is set forth in the catholic creeds . . . to which the historic formularies of the Church of England bear significant witness’. And a footnote specifies that the ‘historic formularies’ are the 39 Articles of Religion, the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, and the Ordering of Bishops, Priests and Deacons.

This, too, is welcome. To me, at any rate, though not I suspect, to everyone. This is where perhaps the spectre of ‘confessionalism’ raises its head. So let’s spend a moment thinking about this point.

The 39 Articles have never had quite the status of a confession in the sense that some continental Protestant churches have Confessions. This has been clear well before our current debates got under way. A great Welsh Anglican of the previous century, W H Griffith Thomas, in his magisterial exposition of the 39 Articles (*The Principles of Theology*, edited posthumously in 1930) pointed out that one of the virtues of the Anglican reformers was that unlike Aquinas or Calvin they did not attempt to set out a ‘cast-iron system which cannot expand’ but rather a series of points to allow for growth in thought and experience (*Principles*, p.xxiv).

Stephen Noll made a similar point in his 2006 paper:

If the Articles were included in a Global Anglican Covenant, would that make the Communion “confessional”? I guess that all depends on how one defines confessional. My own view is that the Articles, under the Scriptures, should be the touchstone of Communion doctrine and discipline, but that individual Provinces might administer this doctrine and discipline differently. At the same time, I think there is an urgent need for a “conversation” with the Articles, as they are clearly dated and deficient in some respects. Article XXXV itself provides a method for this conversation by approving “homilies” based on the Articles. The example of Vatican II and the papal encyclicals of John Paul II may provide a model for formulating authentic contemporary statements of Anglican doctrine.

We have already heard today the anxiety expressed that a ‘confessional’ church would lose the living engagement with the contemporary world which is a hallmark of

Anglicanism, perhaps of liberal Anglicanism in particular. But why should that be? Stephen Noll's brief sketch draws a picture of a church which is well aware of its own context – indeed contexts - and the need to debate with the currents of thought around it.. A Communion which takes the 39 Articles as a touchstone of doctrine and discipline, and which remains in conversation with them through a series of contemporary studies parallel to the original *Book of Homilies* sounds like a church which knows where it is going. And it's going in the right direction.

Some people might object that there are some parts of the Communion which have never given this kind of status to the Articles. My response to that would take me to another story about a bishop –this time Bishop John Richards, formerly of St Davids. If you never knew John Richards, you have to imagine a kind of human terrier, not large in stature, but always ready for a scrap. Once, while Vicar of Skewen, he had taken a funeral and the widow said to him at the end, 'That was a wonderful service Vicar, thank you. But I think you have to know that my husband did not believe in God.' To which John Richards replied 'Well, he does now!'.

Have those provinces never previously acknowledged the Articles? Perhaps, but once they sign this Covenant we can say 'They do now'!

3. Vision of the Christian life The third building block of a worthwhile Covenant is some coherent vision of Christian life. In the St Andrews Draft Covenant, this vision is articulated under four headings. They are helpful headings, though I might have shuffled them around and put them in a different order.

a. *Apostolic mission* I would put the one which comes last, first: apostolic mission (1.1.6). It is quite odd when you think about it that the Lambeth Quadrilateral says nothing about mission as a distinctive of the church. Yes, Christ ordained two sacraments, but he also gave a Great Commission (Matthew 28.18-20).

Logically, one should surely specify the role of the church in proclaiming the good news of Jesus as its *first* task. This is how Luke portrays it in his summary description of the earliest community. First he describes the people receiving the apostles' word, then baptism, then the cluster of activity which sustains the life of the church: apostolic teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer (Acts 2.41-2). At least mission has been acknowledged in this Draft, which is to be welcomed, but it would do better at the head of this list.

If I were being asked to be really radical, I'd split the references to sacraments. Rather than treating them as a locus in themselves, we could place them under the headings of 'mission' and 'worship' respectively. The reference to baptism properly belongs here (i.e. with Acts 2.41 rather than Acts 2.42). This would help us re-envisage baptism as essentially an act connected with the gospel, rather than a cultural rite of passage.

*b. Historic episcopate*

The second heading of the Christian life is that which connects the church with its apostolicity through time and its catholicity across distance; 'the historic episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the unity of his Church' (1.1.4).

There is a bit of a tension here between this clause and 1.1.6, which speaks of sharing apostolic mission with other Churches and traditions. We do have to find a way of speaking about our Bishops which does not unchurch non-episcopal churches. If the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral was intended to have an ecumenical thrust, then Oliver O'Donovan's comment is justified that this clause on episcopacy is a 'bullying' gesture towards non-episcopal churches.

We also need to do a lot of thinking about the Lambeth Conference (why in England?) the Primates' meeting (should it have more power?) and the Archbishop of Canterbury (why does the Primate of All England still have to be the *primus inter pares* of the entire Communion?). Fortunately, I haven't the time or the expertise to say much about any of that, except to give you another provocative piece from Stephen Noll:

In my opinion, the theologico-political position of the Archbishop of Canterbury presents an insuperable obstacle to a fully empowered Global Anglican Communion. This obstacle could be obviated in one of two ways: either by internationalizing the See of Canterbury or by making it a titular office. In one way or another, the office of Presiding Primate must be opened to bishops from all regions of the world. The Roman Catholics can do it; why can't we? Is the Anglican Communion so stuck in its ways that it cannot see the need for genuine diversity in its leadership?

c. *Common Prayer* The *third heading* under which the Christian life might be articulated in any Covenant would concern worship. And here I would also place the reference to the Eucharist, as Acts 2.42 does.

There would be a lot to be said for provinces collaborating on their liturgical revisions, rather than every man doing what is right in his own eyes. The RCL is a good step in the right direction. But the ideal of Common Prayer was a bedrock of the identity of Anglicanism. Greater collaboration and co-operation in liturgical formulation might help us work our way back towards something valuable which we have lost.

This connects with something we were thinking about earlier: the hospitable and open nature of Anglicanism. One of the things which enabled theological variety to flourish within the Church of England in particular was the Prayer Book. Parishes might be High or Low in their approach to worship, Evangelical or Broad Church in their theology. But a common liturgy provided a shared loyalty which kept disparate groups together. Like so many things (as Joni Mitchell put it) ‘Don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you've got till it's gone’. The Prayer Book was rather like the tree in the parable of the mustard seed, which provided a nesting-place for a variety of birds (Matthew 13.32). We have chopped down the tree and we wonder why the birds have flown off in different directions.

Conclusion What I have wanted to argue is that we need *content* in a Covenant and not merely *process*, a solid centre and not just rope bridges to connect the archipelago. We have the resources to articulate such doctrine and hold fast to such content. The St Andrews Draft goes quite a way towards presenting that vision – so two cheers for it.

But what if some couldn't sign up to such a covenant? Well, look at it the other way. What use is a Covenant to which anyone, no matter what their beliefs or practices, could sign up? An Anglicanism which can mean *anything* in fact would mean *nothing*.

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