

REFLECTIONS ON RESPONSES TO THE WINDSOR REPORT COVENANT PROPOSAL

Norman Doe

1. A *critical dialogue* between (i) the reactions experienced by those responding to the covenant proposal and (ii) the resources of theology (in scripture, tradition and reason), could help Anglicans inform, through a practical theological framework, the formal covenant debate in the Communion. An evaluation of responses necessitates:

(a) a systematic presentation of the responses around nine key issues in three basic categories: foundational ideas of a covenant (nature, employment, purposes); the structure and substance of a covenant (form, subjects, content); and the implementation of a covenant (process, adoption, effects);

(b) a choice of theological resources to be deployed for the evaluation, such as scripture, reason and tradition, as the classical criteria in Anglicanism; and:

(c) a balanced statement of the arguments for and against (including the host of theological ideas emerging in them, from ecclesiology to spirituality).

2. The *problem* posed by the responses is the great divergence of opinion within them. Approximately one third favours the covenant principle and *Windsor* draft, a third supports the principle but not the draft, and a third rejects both principle and draft. Though many agree (eg) about the nature of a covenant, within these three groups respondents are divided as to:

(a) whether a covenant accords with the spirit of Anglicanism

(b) its capacity to achieve unity, reconciliation, order and stability

(c) its form (whether it should be descriptive or prescriptive or both)

(d) its subject-matter (whether it should treat (eg) *adiaphora*, scriptural interpretation)

(e) its content (some welcome the draft, but others feel (eg) that: its commitments are unworkable; its understanding of autonomy-in-communion is incorrect; and giving in contentious communion issues a pastoral ministry to Canterbury and a jurisdiction to the Instruments of Unity is too curial); and:

(f) mode of adoption and a disciplinary mechanism to enforce the covenant (many feel the use of law ensures commitment, but for others a covenant should not bind).

The debate should address the extent of agreement/disagreement as to nine key issues.

3. *Analysis* of the proposal and responses indicates the role of theology in propositions advanced in them:

(a) Most have a distinctive theological content (eg): covenanted relations accord with communion as familial; the proper objects of a covenant are unity, reconciliation and mission; covenanting is vocational; communion relations are spiritual and cannot be documented or regulated; or, a covenant will inhibit the work of the Holy Spirit.

(b) Many propositions are juridical (eg): a covenant is not a contract; and some political (eg): no jurisdiction should be vested in the Instruments of Unity.

(c) Some mix theology and law (eg): autonomy-in-communion involves churches having to regard the global community; a covenant will translate the bonds of affection into law; or, covenantal promises are binding.

(d) Others are purely practical (eg): a covenant should be rejected because it is a quick-fix or will take too long to implement.

The debate needs to identify which issues are theological and which juridical.

4. **Reflection** upon the proposal and responses when placed against scripture, tradition and reason tests further the theological value of the propositions in them.

(a) Several responses appeal to scriptural models, fewer to sacramental models, and none (so neglecting the wider ecumenical benefit) to the models afforded by agreements of comparable international ecclesial communities.

(b) The nature, use, objects, prescriptive form, subject-matter, and process of the *Windsor* covenant, accord *generally* with scriptural, sacramental and ecumenical covenants, and the extensively-used agreements of comparable global ecclesial communities.

(c) However, *broadly*, content, juridical adoption, and effects (on membership, discipline, changeability) do not resonate in salvific or sacramental covenants, but do feature in agreements of other global church bodies.

(d) But there are similarities: sacramental covenants (eg) have juridical effects, and ecumenical covenants are increasingly incorporated in Anglican laws.

(e) More particularly, therefore (eg), that: a covenant may enable suspension of church membership is consistent with comparable international agreements; a covenanted Communion should consist of classes of membership contradicts baptismal and marriage covenants; and, a covenant destroys autonomy is not the experience of ecumenical or comparable instruments.

5. In terms of *praxis*, placing responses against the criteria of scripture, tradition (the covenant concept in sacramental theology) and reason (the experiences of other comparable international ecclesial communities) provides something of a road-map (of issues and possible models) for the formal debate. While the proposal and responses indicate *what* is valued, these criteria offer some ideas about *why* propositions in them might be valued. It is perhaps ironic that, whereas the old covenant (law) was not abrogated but fulfilled by the new covenant (grace), the Anglican Communion today debates whether its old tacit covenant of bonds of affection should be fulfilled but not abrogated by a new covenant in law.