

AN EVANGELICAL COMMENTARY ON THE DRAFT COVENANT

A Petition to the Covenant Design Group

We are grateful to the Covenant Design Group for taking up the work of preparing a Draft Anglican Communion Covenant. The events of the past decade in the Communion have made clear, in a way not seen since the 16th century, the need of a strong statement of doctrine and discipline among Christians in our tradition.

We submit the comments below as articulating our Evangelical convictions. We believe that the great debates and events of the Reformation remain foundational for our Christian heritage. In a world where Evangelical Christians are spreading rapidly, including those in many Anglican Provinces, we think it important that our convictions be represented in an all-Communion document.

The Draft Covenant is, in our opinion, an orthodox statement of the Christian faith; it is less characteristically Evangelical. We propose that with relatively minor amendment, this document can express more fully the Anglican Evangelical position.

All church statements emerge from particular contexts, indeed particular controversies. Likewise, this Covenant should address forthrightly the theological errors that have torn of the fabric of the Communion.

In our view the emendations suggested below (in *bold italics*) will strengthen the Covenant document and better represent the Evangelical understanding of the faith.

Sec. 1 Preamble

Proposed Amendment

... in order to proclaim more effectively in our different contexts *the saving love of God for a fallen world accomplished through the death and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ*, to maintain the unity of the Spirit etc.

Explanation: The theme of salvation is a silver chord through all the Scriptures and of particular importance in the proclamation that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim 1:15). In our view, emphasis on God’s responding to the needs of the world is a corollary of God’s saving act in Christ and is addressed adequately under Section 4.

Sec. 2: The Life We Share: Common Catholicity, Apostolicity and Confession of Faith

Proposed Amendment

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

... (5) that, led by the Holy Spirit, it *bears* witness to Christian truth in its historic formularies, etc....

Explanation: As each of the first four subsections is stated in the present tense, so also the classic formularies listed in subsection (5) should be regarded in that tense, as having normative force. The Thirty-Nine Articles, Prayer Book and Ordinal remain the only

universally recognized statement of Anglican doctrine, and they are enshrined in the Constitutions and Prayer Books of many Provinces. They represent the key Reformation insights into the faith, complementing the catholic creeds on the one hand and the Lambeth Quadrilateral on the other.

Sec. 3 Our Commitment to Confession of Faith

Proposed Amendment

In seeking to *maintain the faith given once for all to the saints*, each Church commits itself to...

(1) uphold and act in continuity and consistency with the catholic and apostolic faith, order and tradition, *and the historic Anglican formularies*;

(2) *uphold the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as God's Word written* and to ensure that biblical texts *are interpreted in their plain and canonical sense, through the preaching and teaching of pastors, the regular reading of the people, and the oversight* of bishops and synods, building on our best scholarship, believing that scriptural revelation must continue to illuminate, challenge and transform cultures, structures and ways of thinking;

(3) place former subsection (2) here;

(4) uphold the biblical vision of God's image in humanity *as male and female and our Lord's teaching on the unchangeable standard of marriage of one man and one woman (or abstinence)*;

(5) and (6) renumbered from (4) and (5)

Explanation

We amend the introductory phrase with a reference to the "once for all" character of the Christian faith, as contended for by St. Jude.

We affirm the catholic and apostolic nature of the Church and give it its due in subsection 1, along with the Reformation insights mentioned above.

We believe the authority of Scripture should receive a separate subsection (2) and be given priority in the order of "Word" and "Sacrament."

The use of the phrase "God's Word written" from Article XX is of great importance in the present controversy of authority. We propose interpretation in the "plain and canonical sense" as a somewhat stronger wording to stress the Reformation emphasis on the clarity and unity of Scripture, and we note the joint responsibility of upholding Scripture by people, pastors, scholars and bishops as a classic application of biblical authority.

Finally, we think that the Covenant should openly confront the presenting error of our day: the substitution of personal sexual fulfillment for obedience to God's order of marriage and procreation. We refer to the "unchangeable standard" of marriage in the words of Resolution 66 (Lambeth 1920).

Sec. 4. Our Call to Mission

Proposed Amendment

(see section title)

We affirm that Communion is a gift of God *in Mission*. *In response to the Risen Christ's command*, we commit ourselves:

- (1) *To present Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit so that men and women come to put their faith in God through him, to accept him as their Saviour and to serve him as their King in the fellowship of his Church;*
- (2) *To reach with the Gospel message every tribe and language and people and nation;*
- (3) To teach, baptize and nurture new believers;
- (4) To respond to human need by loving service;
- (5) To seek to transform unjust structures of society and *safeguard the integrity of creation*.

We gratefully acknowledge... etc. (from para. 1 through 3)

Explanation

As Evangelicals, we believe that Christ's Great Commission to the nations should be highlighted in the Covenant. The changes in title and opening sentence attempt to do this. We think the missional priorities as listed represent a proper balance of the Church's preaching, teaching, serving and prophetic call. By using William Temple's classic formulation of Evangelism, adopted by the Lambeth Conference, we wish to make clear the need for call to response as well as proclamation.

Sec. 6: The Unity of the Communion

Proposed Amendment

(6) We acknowledge that in the most extreme circumstances, where member churches choose not to fulfil the substance of the covenant as understood by the Councils of Instruments of the Communion, we will consider that such churches have relinquished *membership in the Anglican Communion*.

Explanation

Throughout history, the Good News has caused division, and the church has faced the twin dangers of heresy and schism. Scripture warns against attacks from without and within. The Covenant should make clear that a member church's "walking apart" is not simply a matter of taste but of substance and carries with it a final exclusion. We assume the "extreme circumstances" will include a due process such as that proposed in "To Mend the Net" and The Windsor Report, and that further reconciliation would involve re-incorporation in a replacement entity that does uphold the Covenant.

*Stephen Noll
11 April 2007*