

## **'The unity that you have given': On the Very Idea of a Covenant**

I want to start with the idea of covenant in the Bible and note two prominent features. First, the covenants that matter are always between God on the one hand and creatures on the other. There is a covenant between God and 'all flesh' after the Flood, and between God and the people of Israel through Moses. Covenants that are between one human being and another, or one nation and another, are unimportant. When the prophets do record them, they present a lack of faith, with Israel trusting in a foreign power rather than in the Lord.

My second point is that these covenants, enacted by God, were always redemptive; they were about reconciliation. With Noah God established that he would never again blot out all flesh; later God pledged himself to the Israelites, although they had been wayward. Consummately, when we were dead in our sins, Christ made a new and eternal covenant 'in [his] blood', shed 'for the forgiveness of sins'.

I want to approach the Anglican Covenant with this in mind: covenants are between God and humanity, and they are redemptive.

### *The Idea of Covenant*

Covenants in the Bible are a good thing. That doesn't mean that everything we then call by that name is a good thing, or bears much relation to covenant in the Bible. One of our most distinguished scholars of the Old Testament, John Barton, has made this point.<sup>1</sup> His judgement on the Anglican Covenant is that the language of covenant 'is not being used in any biblical sense and is no more helpful in inter-Anglican than it is in Jewish-Christian dialogue'.<sup>2</sup> There is a real lack of Biblical subtlety here.

The scriptural analysis offered in the Covenant's preamble is also flawed because it skates over the differences between the biblical covenants it mentions<sup>3</sup>: the covenant with Noah was with all humankind; the covenants with Abraham, Israel, and David were not (other than that they gesture towards Christ). Then, astonishingly, Christ completely *transformed* the very nature of covenant: whereas covenants with the people of Israel separated them from other nations and created difference, the Letter to the Ephesians (quoted in the Covenant) emphasises that on the contrary Christ's death abolishes divisions. This is lost on the authors, or ignored. So is the fact that although covenant has a rich theological history outside the Bible, that is mainly in *Calvinism*. Covenant was central to Calvinism after Calvin; that doesn't make it a foundation for the Anglican Communion. Covenant never featured in the same way in Anglican theology. Latching onto it now seems to me another example of the confessional rootlessness of recent Anglican documents.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Covenant in the Bible and Today' in Mark Chapman, *The Anglican Covenant Unity and Diversity in the Anglican Communion*. London: Continuum. 2008.

<sup>2</sup> See *Church Times*, 18 March 2011.

<sup>3</sup> §2

<sup>4</sup> One of my chief concerns with *Mission-shaped Church* is that it seems to pick and choose at will from a selection of traditions, with little sense that there is an Anglican tradition of ecclesiology. See Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, *For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions* (London: SCM Press, 2010).

The covenants that matter in the Bible are between God and humanity, not between one group of people and another. Using the category of covenant to relate one group of Christians to another is likely to be a mistake, a red herring, a wrong turn. Why? because covenants *create* bonds. They take parties that are *independent* and unite them.<sup>5</sup> That's a wrong turn when it comes to Christians. We are not isolated or independent from one another; we are brothers and sisters, members of the same Body. This is the fatal theological flaw in the Anglican Covenant: it buys into a strange modern individualism that sees the basic state of churches as isolated and separated.<sup>6</sup> Instead, let's say that every church is *constituted* as being in relationship with other churches, just as every Christian is *constituted* as being in relationship with other baptised Christians. To be *in Christ* and to be in his Body are two sides of the same coin.<sup>7</sup>

By the very fact that we are Christians we are always already in relationship with other Christians. The best thing about the Covenant that it wants a church that's at unity. The worst thing, theologically speaking, is that it doesn't see that this unity is fundamentally a gift and a given. Our identity as Christians is given in baptism: it is to be in the body, to be related. This is the primordial fact of ecclesiology. We are not individuals who contract or covenant into relation. It is not, as the Covenant has it, that the 'Instruments of Communion... enable [our Churches] to be conformed together to the mind of Christ'. No: Christ's death, our baptism, the Eucharist, the Scriptures we have in common – these conform us to Christ, not any legal mechanism.

If we start thinking of Christians and churches as first separated, and then contracting into relationships, we are free to pick and choose the terms on which we associate. And since it looks a tricky business, so we can risk some fairly grievous losses on the way. In contrast, if we start with the Church as one Body already, by the grace of God, then none of that follows. We cannot pick and choose the terms on which we associate, or with whom we are willing to be one. I might have problems with the theology and practice of some American churches, or

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<sup>5</sup> It might be said that marriage stands against my contention that the covenants that matter in the Bible are between God and humanity, not between people: marriage is a covenant between people. The *Book of Common Prayer* marriage service certainly refers to 'the vow and covenant betwixt them made'. My sense is that marriage is not explicitly interpreted as a covenant in the Bible itself, at least until it becomes an image for the relationship between Christ and the Church in Ephesians, but I would need to look at that more closely. I agree that following the BCP and our liturgical tradition as Anglicans, we should think of marriage in covenant terms. However, this only strengthens my claim that covenant implies initial separation, since marriage can only bring together in one new flesh those who are not already of one blood. It makes one family of those who are not already one family. Where there is a close familial relation between the prospective couple, marriage is prohibited, as the tables of kindred and affinity in the Prayer Book bear witness. If marriage were invoked against my argument, as an example of a covenant between human beings, I would reply that those who are within Christ's body are already one family through their union with Christ, and that the idea of using a covenant to bring them together makes no more sense – on these terms – than a marriage between siblings.

<sup>6</sup> It's also the problem, I note in passing, with the most recent Anglican-Eastern Orthodox report, *The Church of the Triune God*. The report is remarkable for marking a rapprochement of these Eastern theologians with Western theology. It does so at the price of putting the separated entity before its place in community. My response on reading it was, 'if the price of rapprochement is buying into the Western tendency towards atomisation, then please go back to being as you were.' I would rather that the East were downright awkward than that they copied our worst mistakes.

<sup>7</sup> My favourite worst example of this, ecclesologically speaking, is the section on the Church in Immanuel Kant's *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone*. There he presents Christians as *in themselves*, in their native state, fundamentally isolated. They then choose to band together as a local congregation for pragmatic reasons. The mental giant, the Enlightened Man, however, could do without the Church, and without history or other people at all, as he advances in the spiritual, intellectual and moral life; he could do without mediation of any form – even, it seems, without Jesus.

of some African churches: more's the pity for me. God has saved me into the same Body as them, and that is a fact I cannot change – short of ejecting myself from the Body of Christ.

### *Covenants are Reconciliatory*

My other point was that covenants are reconciliatory in the Bible. Not so the Anglican Covenant. It is obvious that it will exclude churches from the Communion. Some churches will not sign up from the start because they cannot accept the restrictions that signing up will bring. That will leave them disenfranchised not simply relative to a new closer union for the rest of the Communion but also with respect to where they are now. If they do sign up, they will face the single overriding innovation in the Covenant: a panel of judgement with powers of expulsion.

Churches will be right to be wary of signing up. It is quite clear we'd have no women priests in the Church of England if we'd had the covenant in place. Ordaining women would have been an innovation with 'relational consequences', to use the Covenant's own slightly chilling phrase.<sup>8</sup>

Let's admit, there is a tightrope to be walked here. On the one hand Paul enjoins us to bear with 'the weaker brother and sister', precisely over innovations. On the other, sometimes one needs to stick one's head over the parapet, to take a risk: think of liturgy in the vernacular, married priests, lay people in synods. We've been there before and we thought it was worth it. Many of the most significant developments, social, political, or moral, drew fierce opposition from some in the church at the time: the abolition of slavery, the enfranchisement of women, even the institution of pensions.<sup>9</sup> Those parallels don't guarantee that every modern development is right: of course not. They simply show that we have to balance prophecy and towing the line.

The Archbishop of Canterbury has written that the covenant 'should not be thought a means of excluding the difficult or rebellious but as an intensification – for those who so choose – of relations that already exist'. For all I admire the Archbishop, however many times I read this – that the process is about inclusion and strengthening ties – I cannot but see it as the opposite.<sup>10</sup> The Covenant will exclude churches from the Communion. That is surely the *goal* of some who promote it. If we are going to base our ecclesiology on covenant, then let us start instead from the transformation effected by Christ, so that it is no longer about us-and-them, but is a welcome that rests on the unearned grace of God.

Our choice seems to be between loosening or strengthening bonds legally, between rubbing along or throwing out. Our Church gained a new identity at the Reformation by rightly rejecting the centralised authority of the Pope and Vatican. I'd rather urge the whole Church to be less centralised than more. It is odd for a church remoulded at the Reformation to erect a Vatican, a Pope, an Inquisition.

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<sup>8</sup> The phrase reminds me of George Orwell's comment: 'Political dialects... are all alike in that one almost never finds in them a fresh, vivid, homemade turn of speech' and that ugly English often cloaks ugly purposes.

<sup>9</sup> On this last point, for instance, the last time that the saintly bishop Edward King travelled to London to vote in the House of Lords it was to oppose the creation of a national pension system.

<sup>10</sup> Consider, for instance, that 'erring' churches are ejected from the bodies that are charged with deliberating and judging. The Covenant is cast in terms of relationship and common mind, but those who differ are excluded from the family and from the structures that are claimed to promote discussion. We would see the successive exclusion of supposedly wayward provinces from the authorities that define what is wayward.

The common claim that the Anglican Covenant will bring unity not exclusion is simply wrong. It is an evasion. But there is plenty of evasion going on here, plenty of sidestepping in the Covenant. There is, for instance, little *historical* analysis. The process by which we have an Anglican Communion was messy – this is glossed over. Or consider Biblical scholarship and the way in which the Bible speaks. We are called in the Covenant to ‘hear, read, mark and inwardly digest’ the Scriptures, and to attend to the ‘results of rigorous study by lay and ordained scholars’.<sup>11</sup> But what does that *mean*? That is *the question*. What is more, it *has* been addressed and in relation to the our vexed questions: a Communion-wide theological consultation met to discuss the presenting issues and the way the Bible is used in relation to them. They reported that there are theological reasons for either a more accepting or a more traditional view of gay relationships. Their report was left to sink without a trace.

This is all very dispiriting, in particular that the methodological issues behind our predicament are glossed over: the way we read the Bible and the way its authority speaks. We need processes to help us understand and honour one another’s faith, not mechanisms to police and eject. And all of this avoids talking about the elephant in the Covenant’s room, which is the value and validity, or otherwise, of gay relationships. We need processes to help us think about that together not, as I say, mechanisms to police and eject. The Church of England has been a church unafraid, a church of scholarship, of honesty. Bucking the issue is not the Anglican way. The procedural ostrich position of the Covenant does not repay our trust.

### *Conclusion*

There, then, is the horror, and the promise, the tragedy and the hope, of our situation. We *are* in union, in communion, *in the Body of Christ*. We belong not because of our efforts, but as a gift. We might sometimes, any of us, think of this as an odd sort of gift, as we look around the Church and see the people in our family – but it *is* a gift. The task is to learn to act like it’s true. It’s a task of the first importance. It’s just that the proposed mechanism (and unfortunately ‘mechanism’ is exactly the right word), the Anglican Covenant, sends a shiver down my spine. It is theologically flawed, unreconciliatory, and profoundly at odds with the genius of our Anglican tradition. It deserves to be rejected.

We should start instead from the theology encapsulated rather brilliantly in the Eucharistic preface for unity in *Common Worship*:

And now we give you thanks  
because of the unity that you have *given* us in your Son  
and that you are the God and Father of us all,  
above all and through all and in all.

Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> §1.21