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THE ANGLICAN COVENANT

By David Phillips

Following the Windsor Report and decisions of the Anglican Primates an international body was set up by the Archbishop of Canterbury to produce an Anglican Covenant. The intent is that each national or provincial Church will in due course sign up to the Covenant and bind themselves in to its mechanisms. The aim is to prevent the divisions created by revisionists in recent years.

In July the General Synod had a first look at this and agreed in principle with process. The Covenant is only in draft form and Synod gave the two Archbishops the job of responding to this on behalf of the Synod. Though the Synod gave support by a large majority there are concerns about the outcome of all this.

The text of the covenant

The Covenant is only a draft but it is very weak in its assertions about the confessional basis of Anglicanism, it is lacking in what it says about the presenting issues, and it will be open to abuse.

Confessional basis

Regarding Scripture the covenant declares of the Anglican Communion *that it professes the faith which is uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures as containing all things necessary for salvation and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith, and which is set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation.*

This, along with other parts of the opening section, is based on the Church of England's Declaration of Assent. But in the present environment it is inadequate. It ought to be plain to everyone that the Declaration has not stopped people entering the Church of England ministry who do not believe in God, nor those who do not accept the divinity of Christ, nor those who engage in or promote sodomy.

The words are too vague so that people can affirm them even if they do not believe at heart what words might be thought to imply. A Covenant needs to state, as our Articles do, that the Scriptures are the very Word of God. The proposed words from the Declaration of Assent allow people to subtract from Scripture by arguing that only parts of the Bible reveal the faith whilst other parts are no longer relevant. The words also allow people to add to Scripture by arguing that proclaiming afresh actually means changing the message to suit this generation.

Likewise the statement about the Anglican formularies, also from the Declaration of Assent, is weak. Clergy in the past were required to ascribe *ex animo* (from the heart) to the Articles, because they are a faithful exposition of the teaching of Scripture. But this modern wording merely says, that the Church has borne witness (past tense) to this faith in the formularies.

These words may seem to some to be superficially attractive, but the experience of the Church of England shows that they do not provide a restraint against error. What is needed is a return to a clear affirmation of Scripture and the formularies.

Presenting issues

The Anglican Communion is being torn apart first and foremost by the promotion of sexual immorality, in particular homosexual immorality. This is an issue on which the Scriptures are plain and the Church through history has been equally clear. But the draft covenant does not mention this

issue at all. Imagine if the Councils of Nicea and Constantinople had not mentioned the divinity of Christ and just issued a vague statement about fellowship and structures! If the Covenant does not address the issues tearing us apart, and declare sin to be sin, then it will be utterly pointless.

Open to abuse

Section 3(1) asserts that *we will commit to uphold...biblically derived moral values and the vision of humanity received by and developed in the communion of member Churches.*

Some will take this to mean that if the US and Canada develop the practice of blessing same-sex unions, based on their vision of humanity, then the rest of us should accept that.

Section 6(2) says *each Church commits itself to spend time with openness and patience in matters of theological debate and discernment to listen and to study with one another in order to comprehend the will of God.*

Some will take this to mean that we discern the will of God by listening to one another. But Article 20 states plainly that the Church cannot establish anything that is contrary to the Word of God. It doesn't matter what new insights any group may have, nor how long a listening process is embarked upon, it will still be contrary to the will of God, if it is contrary to Scripture. In its present form the Covenant will be open to abuse. It needs substantial revision, but can we be confident this will happen?

Who will respond?

The General Synod gave the two Archbishops the job of responding, and therefore of seeking to change the Covenant. They are to consult with the House of Bishops and the Archbishops' Council. At heart the Archbishop of Canterbury agrees with the revisionists. Over the summer the Archbishop of York argued that the promotion of immorality is not an issue over which Christians should divide. The House of Bishops showed itself incapable of leadership when it capitulated to the Government over Civil Partnerships. It is to be hoped that others in the Communion will see the dangers, but the General Synod has effectively committed itself to a meaningless compromise.

The Covenant concept

The concept of the covenant was first articulated fully in the Windsor Report. As a concept it has some attraction since it correctly assumes that the Anglican Church is a confessional Church. However, it was always going to run into danger.

First, as has been highlighted, it was in danger of addressing the wrong issues, in particular structures, rather than doctrine.

Secondly, there is the problem of who will police it, who will monitor whether people really stick to what they say and on what basis will they decide? The Windsor Report envisages that the Archbishop of Canterbury be given this role. There are obvious problems with the present occupant of this office, but even if he were perfectly orthodox would it be desirable to give one person such authority? This shifts us in a papal direction. In an episcopal church the tendency to centralise power is a constant problem.

Thirdly, the Covenant concept seems to focus far too much on the creation of an international structure for Anglicanism with the Covenant forming an important place in that. This again is part of the danger of institutional based thinking.

What we need as Anglicans is an arrangement whereby member churches themselves provide the basis of fellowship. This is the point of a common confession of faith, that we declare ourselves to be in fellowship with those who share the same faith. Therefore, a member Church would recognise

the validity of ministry and want to share in fellowship with those churches that stand solidly on the same ground. The best way to achieve this is for provinces to declare themselves to be in communion with those who share the same foundational basis. A covenant could certainly articulate this, but the present document does not, and it focuses far too much on structures and process.

The affirmation of the principles must include that the Scriptures are the Word of God, and to uphold the formularies (39 Articles, Prayer Book and Ordinal). In every generation the people of God have been beset by false teaching and it has been necessary to state not simply what they believe but what therefore is contrary to sound belief and practice. A number of statements, such as the Kuala Lumpur Statement and Lambeth 1.10 have emerged in response to one particular error of this generation, and Churches should not be afraid to insist that those in fellowship hold the line on this issue. At heart this is not negative but a positive affirmation of the place of marriage in the purposes of God and that sexual intercourse belongs solely within the lifelong commitment of a man and woman in marriage.

When people deviate from this shared faith then provinces should be perfectly entitled to conclude unilaterally that communion has been broken by people not upholding the common faith. It would be better if this decision could be taken jointly and bodies such as the Primates meeting and the Anglican Consultative Council provide a forum in which it could happen, but primacy must rest with the national or provincial body. Once the wider fellowship takes to itself as a right the power to do this, and the structure to facilitate it, we have gone beyond what is desirable. In fact the Covenant proposals do move us a direction more akin to the Roman Catholic Church whereas Anglicanism has had more in common structurally with the eastern churches which resisted the claims of Rome.

The aim is to prevent Anglicanism becoming defined principally by institutions, and instead have it defined principally by the faith we share.

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