

A Critique of Sections 1, 2, and 3 of the Anglican Covenant

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June 1, 2011

Although much has been said and written about the Anglican Covenant, critics have been superficial and generous in their evaluation of its first three sections. Section 4 has been a lightning rod for criticism, which has both diverted attention from the rest of the Covenant and encouraged charity toward it so as not to be seen as uncoöperative. The devil, it is often said, hides in the details, however, and the exact wording of Sections 1, 2, and 3 is important. Churches considering adoption of the Covenant need to understand just what they are being asked to sign on to, so that they can evaluate the likelihood of their being subjected to “relational consequences” for their actions past, present, or future.

I have long thought the first three sections of the Covenant misleading and dangerous, but I have resisted the daunting task of making a systematic argument to that effect. In what follows, however, I offer a critique of Sections 1, 2, and 3 in the hope that doing so will encourage more thorough and honest discussion of those parts of the Covenant.

I undertake this task as a defender of the integrity of my church and with my skills as a technical editor, one who seeks clarity in a text and who is obliged to raise questions wherever clarity is lacking. In this instance, unfortunately, I cannot go back to the author and suggest rewording, since we have been told that the text to which churches are being asked to subscribe is the “final text.” I cannot, therefore, always provide a definitive explication of the meaning of the Covenant, but I can suggest what, in practice, it *might* mean. This is the best anyone can do.

I will not attempt to analyze the Introduction, which, according to §4.4.1 is not actually part of the Covenant. The Introduction is a page and a half of impenetrable gobbledegook intended to lend an air of religiosity to the Covenant and to discourage serious reading of what follows. Likewise, I will ignore Section 4 for now, which is of an entirely different character.

My observations will be of greatest interest to members of The Episcopal Church, and especially to deputies to the 2012 General Convention who will likely determine the fate of the Covenant in relation to The Episcopal Church. I trust that other Anglicans will also find my remarks helpful.

Preamble

Let me begin with the Preamble of the Covenant. Here and in what follows, I will quote the Covenant text sparingly. Readers should read my comments with the [Covenant text](#) itself readily available in order to follow my remarks.

The Preamble seems reasonably straightforward. I do find the citation of [Revelation 7:9](#) to be both pretentious and irrelevant, but this is only a stylistic issue.

Section One: Our Inheritance of Faith

This section includes assertions that “each church affirms.”

Section 1.1.1 is certainly unobjectionable.

Section 1.1.2 is a bit problematic. What, exactly does it mean to affirm that

The historic formularies of the Church of England, forged in the context of the European Reformation and acknowledged and appropriated in various ways in the Anglican Communion, bear authentic witness to this faith.

A footnote explains that what is being referred to here are “The Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordering of Bishops, Priests, and Deacons.” The significance of the “historic formularies” has been downplayed somewhat in this draft over earlier ones. The Episcopal Church, of course, never used the 1662 prayer book, and I think that Episcopalians would not accept the Articles of Religion as a valid statement of their Anglican faith. Can The Episcopal Church “affirm” §1.1.2 in good conscience? I suspect not.

I cannot accept, and believe that The Episcopal Church cannot accept, the characterization, in §1.1.3, of the Old and New Testaments “as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.” This formulation has tended to earn a bye by virtue of being attributed, in a footnote, to the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral. Significantly, however, this particular wording appeared in the wording adopted by the 1888 Lambeth Conference. It was not part of the resolution adopted in Chicago by Episcopal bishops in 1886 and never formally adopted by the General Convention of The Episcopal Church. The wording of §1.1.3 seems to elevate Scripture over tradition and reason and could be—and almost certainly will be by some Anglican churches—seen as an assertion of *sola scriptura*.

Section 1.1.4 is also derived from the Chicago and Lambeth Quadrilaterals, but, again, the Covenant favors the Lambeth articulation. What, exactly, does it mean to affirm the Apostles’ Creed “as the baptismal symbol”? This seems to make no sense. And what of The Episcopal Church’s Baptismal Covenant in the 1979 BCP? Is it somehow incompatible with §1.1.4?

Section 1.1.5 also derives from the Chicago and Lambeth Quadrilaterals. What is the significance of “and of the elements ordained by him”? If wine is unavailable and grape juice is used, is this a violation of the Covenant? Perhaps this section is too specific.

I see no problems in §1.1.6.

Section 1.1.7 is clearly asserting that our churches are liturgical and, in one way or another, derive our liturgies from the first Book of Common Prayer. The phrase “shared patterns of our common prayer and liturgy” suggests a uniformity that does not exist, however. The wording is circumspect, perhaps in recognition that a distressing amount of Anglican worship is *not* based on the local prayer book.

What, exactly, is the “apostolic mission” referred to in §1.1.8? Do all Anglican churches understand this mission the same way?

In general, §1.1 gets into trouble by being too specific. It thereby encourages disputes regarding whether churches might be acting in a way that is incompatible with the Covenant. Doing anything to encourage such debates is not going to advance the reputed goal of keeping the Anglican Communion together.

Section 1.2 enumerates commitments of signatories of the Covenant. It is quite reactionary, although this has not been widely noted. The Covenant has a strong prejudice against change.

That prejudice is immediately apparent in §1.2.1. Churches commit

to teach and act in continuity and consonance with Scripture and the catholic and apostolic faith, order and tradition, as received by the Churches of the Anglican Communion, mindful of the common councils of the Communion and our ecumenical agreements.

When did the “Churches of the Anglican Communion” receive the faith they are supposed to uphold? Did the Church of England receive it before The Episcopal Church did? Did each receive the same faith? What about the Anglican Episcopal Church of Brazil? What are the “common councils of the Communion”? The Lambeth Conference? The Primates’ Meeting? Whose “ecumenical agreements”? Does the Anglican Communion have any ecumenical agreements? (I don’t think so.) Does The Episcopal Church have to be “mindful” of the relationship of the Church of England and the Church of Sweden, since those churches are members of the [Porvoo Communion](#)? Does the Church of Nigeria (Anglican) somehow have to be respectful of The Episcopal Church’s relationship to the Moravian Church in North America? Does anyone really know—can anyone really know—what §1.2.1 allows and what it prohibits?

Section 1.2.2 may seem innocuous on first reading, but the reality is that the Communion has many conflicting ideas about what is “the teaching of Holy Scripture,” and many would argue that that teaching has been and is now in conflict with “the catholic tradition.” Ultimately, this section will mean whatever the Standing Committee says it means. That is unlikely to be what The Episcopal Church thinks it *should* mean.

It is significant (and disturbing) that neither §1.2.1 nor §1.2.2 acknowledges *reason* as a source of authority for the Communion. Apparently, Richard Hooker is not going to be the quintessential theologian of the Anglican Communion that will be created by the Anglican Covenant. The omission again illustrates the profound prejudice the Covenant has for forever keeping things as they are, since neither tradition nor a literal reading of Scripture allows latitude for change.

As far as I can see, §1.2.3 is complete gobbledygook. I have no idea what it means. It asserts that churches commit



to witness, in this [theological and moral] reasoning, to the renewal of humanity and the whole created order through the death and resurrection of Christ, and to reflect the holiness that in consequence God gives to, and requires from, his people.

I suggest that statements like this are not helpful if a layperson like myself can make so little sense of it. This section will endear Episcopalians neither to the Covenant nor to the Anglican Communion. This is the sort of statement that gives theology a bad name.

Section 1.2.4 overall seems reasonable, but it has some worrisome eccentricities. The “communal reading of ... the Scriptures” seems to suggest that we all must interpret Scripture the same way. Surely, this is unacceptable. (Section 3.2.3 elaborates this theme.) I have no idea what to do with “and costly witness to.” Is this about martyrdom or what?

Section 1.2.5, concerning the handling of Scripture, is not, in itself, objectionable. The problem, of course, is that one person’s faithful, respectful, comprehensive, and coherent interpretation of Scripture is another person’s misreading. Provisions such as §1.2.1 lead me to believe that sincerity in interpretation will not be a defense for any interpretation deemed non-traditional.

Section 1.2.6 is just fine. It is perhaps the only provision in the entire Covenant that could be viewed as “liberal.”

Section 1.2.7 is another provision whose meaning is obscure. What does it mean to act “in accordance with existing canonical disciplines”? The Anglican Communion itself has no canons, so what canons are being invoked here? What does it mean “to nurture and sustain eucharistic communion”? I suspect this means that no church should do anything that would cause another church to declare broken or impaired communion. If so, it is another instance of a prejudice against any church’s rocking the Anglican Communion boat.

The final clause of §1.2.8 sounds lovely. But the notion of pursuing “a common pilgrimage with the whole Body of Christ” is another instance of the Covenant insisting that no church can do anything novel unless the whole Communion goes along. Here, in fact, there is a suggestion that all *Christians*, not just all *Anglicans* must agree. Thank you, no, I prefer a church that’s alive to one that’s preserved in formaldehyde.

Section Two: The Life We Share with Others: Our Anglican Vocation

The second section of the Anglican Covenant begins with propositions that signatories affirm.

It is difficult to object to §2.1.1, but it is easy to be suspicious of it. What does it mean to assert that “communion is a gift of God?” If we believe that all things come of God, then surely communion does. But so do tsunamis, by that reasoning. (Christians have a tendency to attribute to God those things they like and to absolve God of responsibility for those things they don’t like. It is difficult to find a rational basis for such belief.) I think that the authors want readers to believe that the Anglican *Communion* is a gift of God. It is not clear just how good this particular gift is or why Anglicans, specifically, have been so blessed. In any case, arguing that the Anglican Communion is a gift of God could become an excuse for condemning any action that “tears the fabric of the Communion” as a rejection of God’s gift.

In §2.1.2, the Covenant begins to make the case for the new Anglican Communion the Archbishop of Canterbury is hoping we will all embrace, one that achieves “a more fully developed communion life.” There are many scales on which our communion life might be “more fully developed.” Churches could, for example, develop a communion life that is more tolerant, understanding, and mutually supportive. That is not the kind of development envisioned by the Covenant, however. Instead, the Covenant is luring signatories into “a worldwide family of interdependent churches,” as it is expressed in §2.1.4. “Interdependent,” of course, despite protestations in the Covenant to the contrary, means constrained, not independent, not autonomous.

The function of §2.1.3 is unclear, unless it is intended to make us feel guilty, so we will agree to adopt the Covenant.

Section 2.1.4 is not objectionable except insofar as it assumes that we desire to become “a worldwide family of interdependent churches.” I, for one, have no such desire.

Section 2.1.5 expresses the desire to see “full, visible unity of the Church,” since Jesus is reported by St. John to have prayed “that they all may be one” ([John 17:21](#)). “Being one” does not necessarily mean that all churches must unite. What would our world be like if all churches were the same, if going to one house of worship delivered the same experience as going to another? I suggest that such a world would minister to a minority of people, leaving most people outside the church. I, for one, do not lament our present diversity, either in the Anglican Communion or in the world at large. When all people have the same personality, education, ethnicity, and nationality, the Christian Church can fully unite. Until then, doing so is counterproductive.

On the basis of the assertions of §2.1, §2.2 lists commitments assumed by churches that adopt the Covenant.

In §2.2.1, signatories commit to evangelism “and, with mutual accountability, to share our God-given spiritual and material resources in this task.” What, exactly, is the “mutual accountability” called for here? Would The Episcopal Church be acting contrary to the Covenant if our evangelism doesn’t look like the evangelism of, say, the Church of Nigeria (Anglican)? Are we expected to help finance the Nigerian church’s evangelism?

I can find little to object to in §2.2.2, which is derived from the five Marks of Mission. (Other marks of mission have been suggested recently, however.) I don’t see the point of “as essential aspects of our mission in communion” in §2.2.2.e.

Section 2.2.3, 2.2.4, and 2.2.5 seem unobjectionable.

Section Three: Our Unity and Common Life

Section 3.1 enumerates more affirmations. It is here that the Covenant begins to reveal how it will transform the organization of the Communion.

Section 3.1.1 is unremarkable.

Section 3.1.2 begins with a resolution “to live in a Communion of Churches.” Perhaps you thought we were already doing that. We are not now living in the “Communion of Churches” outlined in the Covenant, however, which is living “in communion with autonomy and accountability,” arguably an oxymoron. There is a lot of gibberish here, but we can see in §3.1.2 the beginning of the institutionalization of the “Instruments of Communion” and an exalted role for bishops. (In general, the Covenant seems to see laypeople as chopped liver.) For example, §3.1.2 asserts that “[e]ach Church, with its bishops in synod, orders and regulates its own affairs and its local responsibility for mission through its own system of government and law” Arguably, this statement is not true of The Episcopal Church, as the House of Bishops only acts in concert with the House of Deputies in the General Convention to govern the church. Perhaps this form of governance is “incompatible with the Covenant.”

Section 3.1.3 again asserts “the central role of bishops” and speaks of “the historic threefold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons.” There is no role for laypeople here! By contrast, in the Catechism of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer (p. 855), the answer to the question of who are the ministers of the Church is: “The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons.”

It is §3.1.4 that fully establishes the four “Instruments of Communion” as permanent and essential elements of the Anglican Communion. I find this worrisome, as I believe that the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Primates’ Meeting have seriously abused their authority since 2003. (Actually, the Primates’ Meeting had no authority to abuse, so it simply attempted to appropriate authority. The primates seemed to repent of their arrogation of power at their most recent meeting in Dublin, but, when primates who stayed away from the meeting return, so may the primates’ meddling in the affairs of individual Anglican churches.) Moreover, certain primates and their allies have tried to elevate resolutions of the Lambeth Conference—well, one of them, anyway, [Resolution I.10 of 1998](#)—to the status of “the teaching of the Communion.” Given this history of abuse of power, why do we want to give more authority to these “instruments,” allowing them even more opportunity to become instruments of *oppression*? This section contains many phrases that reveal an intention to remake the Anglican Communion into an entity that acts in lockstep:

- our shared faith and common life and mission
- the common faith of the Church’s members
- calls the Churches into mutual responsibility and interdependence

From the standpoint of what we might call Anglican Communion polity, I am particularly concerned about the position of the Archbishop of Canterbury. In practice, he has become more than simply the spiritual head of the Communion, more than *primus inter pares*. Americans especially should be wary of placing a single man—I surely do not expect to see a female Archbishop of Canterbury in my lifetime—at the center of all the “Instruments.” That man is not chosen by the Communion and is not even elected in any democratic sense from his own church! When the Standing Committee recommends “relational consequences” to the Primates’ Meeting or to the Anglican Consultative Council, as described in §4.2.5, it is a group of people who have

to agree on the imposition of such consequences. Such a recommendation to the Archbishop of Canterbury is imposed or not based on the will of a single person from whose decision there is no appeal.

Finally, in Item IV of §3.1.4, we find this explanation:

In the Primates' Meeting, the Primates and Moderators are called to work as representatives of their Provinces in collaboration with one another in mission and in doctrinal, moral and pastoral matters that have Communion-wide implications.

I am unclear as to what this passage means. What is it that results from the work of the primates? Is it more interference in the affairs of individual churches? We need less, not more of that. I don't know if the Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church is authorized to perform the work specified in §3.1.4.

Acknowledging the foregoing, §3.2 sets out additional commitments that signatories assume. Each of these commitments is designed to rein in the autonomy of Communion members.

Section 3.2.1 requires churches "to have regard for the common good of the Communion in the exercise of its autonomy," i.e., to restrain the exercise of autonomy voluntarily. It also requires churches "to endeavour to accommodate their recommendations [i.e., those of the Instruments of Communion.]"

Section 3.2.2 is an excellent example of doubletalk. It commits churches

to respect the constitutional autonomy of all of the Churches of the Anglican Communion, while upholding our mutual responsibility and interdependence in the Body of Christ, and the responsibility of each to the Communion as a whole.

In other words, the autonomy of Anglican churches is to be respected except when it isn't. This is not reassuring.

It gets worse. Ostensibly, §3.2.3 requires that Communion members remain at the table to discuss matters of importance. Given the way meetings have been boycotted in recent years and the way certain people have been banned from those same meetings, this is a welcome obligation. But this section also asserts that some issues "may prove to be distractions or even obstacles to the faith." Presumably, the Communion reserves the right *not* to talk about these issues or to discuss them interminably without reaching resolution. (It is not hard to imagine what some of these issues might be.) "All such matters therefore," we are told, "need to be tested by shared discernment in the life of the Church." It is this *shared discernment* that churches are buying into when they adopt the Anglican Covenant. This means that, until there is substantial (or perhaps even universal) agreement about certain contentious matters, no church can move forward on them. If The Episcopal Church accedes to shared discernment in the Anglican Communion, it is a fair assumption that LGBT persons will achieve equality in our church at the second coming of Christ or when hell freezes over, whichever occurs last. (Section 4 provides a preview of what shared discernment will look like in practice.)

Section 3.2.4 extends the restrictions on autonomy to agreements with other churches.

Just in case churches have not yet understood that they are surrendering their independence in adopting the Covenant, §3.2.5 obligates them

to act with diligence, care and caution in respect of any action which may provoke controversy, which by its intensity, substance or extent could threaten the unity of the Communion and the effectiveness or credibility of its mission.

This provision establishes what [Jim Naughton](#) has called “governance by hurt feelings.” Churches are expected to intuit how others in the Communion will react to an action that may be not only justified, but even required by a reasonable interpretation of Scripture. Section 3.2.5 elevates politeness over truth.

The Covenant refers to conflicts that “could threaten the unity of the Communion and the effectiveness or credibility of its mission.” Does (or should) the Communion have a mission apart from supporting the individual churches in *their* missions? This is, I think, an important question. The Anglican Communion is not now a church itself, and I do not believe it should be. (I am opposed to the Communion’s negotiating ecumenical agreements, for example.) Individual Anglican churches have, in fact, painted themselves into a corner by claiming authority over and thereby taking responsibility for the actions of other Anglican churches, a responsibility that is not really theirs to assume. If Muslims try to embarrass an African church based on what, say, The Episcopal Church has done, that African church now has—if it chooses to invoke it—credible deniability. That is, the African church can assert that Anglican churches are autonomous and not subject to outside pressure or control. It is therefore not responsible for the actions of The Episcopal Church. This posture, which wisdom would have urged in the past, will not be an available option under the Anglican Covenant.

Section 3.2.6 forces churches to accept mediation in situations of conflict.

Section 3.2.7 is intended to intimidate churches into behaving as the Covenant intends them to behave.

Some Final Words

I hope that the foregoing will cause those who will be participating in the 2012 General Convention of The Episcopal Church to reconsider the notion that Sections 1, 2, and 3 of the Anglican Covenant are somehow innocuous. They are, in fact, pernicious. It is my sincerest hope that other Anglicans around the world will conclude this as well.

We should not allow Anglicans, in discussing the Covenant, to declare blithely that Sections 1–3 of the covenant are acceptable, without insisting that they explain why they believe this to be so. It is important that all Anglican churches consider the *whole* of the Covenant. Section 4, after all, exists to enforce what is set forth in Sections 1–3.

I hope that my critique will encourage discussion of the Covenant in greater detail. No doubt, I have minimized some threats to The Episcopal Church and to the Anglican Communion and

failed to notice others. I believe that serious discussion among Episcopalians can only lead to the conclusion that the Anglican Covenant has little to recommend it.

The goal of the General Convention should be not only to defend The Episcopal Church against the depredations of an ill-advised Anglican Covenant, but also to encourage other Anglican churches to reject the Covenant as well.