

# Anglican Covenant – Bishop’s Council

The Anglican Communion has fascinated me since my mid-teens, as long as I’ve been an Anglican and had an academic interest in history – the different national churches, the translation of the Prayer Book into myriad languages, the English parish church building exported into every climate and exotic architectural style. I also have a great affection for and owe a great debt to the Episcopal Church, which inspired and nurtured my faith in the first place. Although my focus here is on the role the American church is playing in the current travails of the Communion, I don’t for a moment pretend that the Americans are solely responsible for these difficulties. The conservative over-reaction to them is equally problematic. But I think I understand American religious culture from the inside, which I cannot say about the post-colonial churches. I also speak as someone who values deeply the comprehensive identity of Anglicanism particularly as I’ve found it lived out in the Church of England, even if I frequently can’t fathom how such a broad and diverse institution manages to hold together.

Also, a word of caution. I don’t offer a detailed apologia or critique of the terms of the Covenant. I’m more interested in its overall implications for the way we live out our lives in Christ. I see the Covenant as offering a choice between our declining into a federation of churches sharing a common heritage or drawing ever more closely together in Christ as a real communion of churches.

So, first of all, I want to contradict the widespread assumption around the communion that the Episcopal Church is simply an ultra-liberal institution, through and through. While its leadership is predominantly liberal, many of its members are more cautious and conservative. They would now identify themselves as being communion-minded, or ‘Windsor-compliant’ as it’s often expressed. This is an historic tension within the Episcopal Church, certainly present in the colonial period but coming to the fore only when efforts were made to unite the members of the Church of England into a national Church following the American War of Independence. Those churchmen led by William White, later the first bishop of Pennsylvania, who were commissioned to come up with a Book of Common Prayer for the American church had to produce something that reflected the reality of the new political situation they found themselves in – no more prayers for the monarch. In addition, however, they were men deeply imbued with the contractual principles of the Enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> White modelled the government of the new church on the principles of civil government enunciated in the American Constitution. In that civil society, authority was understood to flow up from below, from the people, whereas the Church of England insisted that the episcopate was the source of authority and government in the church under God – authority from above. The enlightenment churchmen also took the opportunity to reshape the Prayer Book according to their ideological ends.<sup>2</sup> They claimed in the preface to the proposed Prayer Book of 1786 that ‘the doctrines of the Church of England are preserved entire’. It’s highly important to note this declared intention to be faithful to the inheritance from the Church of England. It is a regular refrain throughout the history of the Episcopal

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick V. Mills, *Bishops by Ballot: An Eighteenth Century Ecclesiastical Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press) 1978.

<sup>2</sup> Ross N. Hebb, *Samuel Seabury and Charles Inglis. Two Bishops, Two Churches* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press) 2010, ch. 3.

Church, and it has often signalled in fact significant alterations to that inheritance. This proposed Prayer Book deleted the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds and omitted the descent into hell from the Apostles' Creed, along with parts of the Psalter and the lectionary that were deemed to be 'hurtful', the sign of the Cross in baptism, various of the Thirty-nine Articles, and the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis from Evening Prayer. Anything that the revisers did not deem 'rational' was chopped. With the best will in the world, it's difficult to see how they could say that 'the doctrines of the Church of England are preserved entire' with these changes.

If the rational enlightenment assumptions of William White marked one pole of Episcopalian believing in this period, Samuel Seabury, who had already been consecrated Bishop of Connecticut by the Scottish Episcopalians, represented the alternative.<sup>3</sup> The New England Anglican tradition had its origins in the conversion of several leading Congregationalist clergy and scholars to the Church of England, having been convinced by their reading of the ancient Church Fathers of the necessity of Episcopal ordination. Despite having started out as a tiny, oppressed minority in puritan New England, they were a dynamic and influential high church movement drawing significant numbers of converts from the Congregational established churches.<sup>4</sup> In his analysis of the proposed Prayer Book, Seabury rightly perceived the influence of Deism (God as a distant clock-maker), Unitarianism (denial of the Trinity), and Arianism (denial of the divinity of Christ) at work. His brand of Anglicanism insisted on fidelity to the witness of the early Church, a catholic adherence to the inheritance of faith: He wrote, 'the surest way to guard against this mischief, is to attend to the interpretations of the oldest Christians and of the universal Church.' And so Seabury fought a rearguard action against these changes. The desire for the unity of the Church was sufficiently strong that he was able to reverse the most serious of the changes. In this he was aided and abetted by the bishops of the Church of England, who refused to consecrate bishops for America unless the American Prayer Book remained more faithful to the inheritance of 1662.

I mention this telling vignette from the history of the Episcopal Church to remind us that the tensions that we see today in the life of that Church are no new phenomenon. They have been present at least since the beginning of its independent history. I find this strangely comforting. The doctrinal issues under consideration then – the divinity of Christ, the Trinitarian nature of God – were of far greater import than the issues that divide us now. If they could manage to preserve unity then, we can do so now, if it means enough to us.

My fear is that we no longer care enough about unity to hold on to it. Unity is not an idea that means much in the context of American religious life. Americans are strongly imbued with a sense of their own 'exceptionalism', and this is (if possible) even more true of their religious than of their political and social life.<sup>5</sup> The particular extreme reformed Protestantism that arrived with the early settlers has formed the theological habits of the continent, with a conviction that in the new world the original humanity, before-the-fall humanity could be recovered. This assumption has

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<sup>3</sup> See Paul Victor Marshall, *One, Catholic, and Apostolic: Samuel Seabury and the Early Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Publishing) 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Peter M. Doll, *Revolution, Religion, and National Identity. Imperial Anglicanism in British North America, 1745-1795* (London: Associated University Presses) 2000.

<sup>5</sup> This discussion of the place of Episcopalians within the spectrum of American religious life is drawn from Ephraim Radner and Philip Turner, *The Fate of Communion: The Agony of Anglicanism and the Future of a Global Church* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans) 2006 and corroborated by my own observation and experience.

been further shaped and expanded by Americans' experience of the land: as settlers moved west, inescapably they were always encountering new sights, new opportunities, new peoples. If ever there were a land in which humanity thought it could re-invent itself, this was it. When the historian Frederick Jackson Turner formulated his 'frontier' thesis of American history,<sup>6</sup> he perceived that persistent adaptation to frontier living allowed the constant reinvention of civilization from its barbarian beginnings. As the philosopher Joseph Needleman said in his examination of the Shakers, 'America is the land of zero. Start from zero, we start from nothing. That is the idea of America.'

The American religious experience is like no other, and even if American Anglicans have historically identified themselves as standing apart from evangelical Protestantism, as being a cut above socially and intellectually, their actual experience is nevertheless deeply imbued with these same primordialist assumptions. From the beginning of the Republic, American Anglicans assumed their church was 'purer' than the Mother Church of England because they had disposed of state establishment. America is a self-referring cultural power; it does not occur to most Americans to consult others, politically or spiritually, to arrive at an understanding of truth and right. The great American literary scholar Harold Bloom, a secular Jew, has argued that virtually all Americans, whatever their religious disposition or denominational label, are Gnostics.<sup>7</sup> What does he mean by this? 1) That there is no higher religious authority than the private individual. 2) That every individual can reach religious truth by his or her own efforts. 3) External expressions of formal religion (churches, worship, creeds) are unnecessary, and potentially a harmful block to true spirituality. 4) Any attempt to tell me what to believe is a threat to religious freedom. In such an approach to religion, there is no place for the fall, no place for the assumption that our human condition is fundamentally flawed by disobedience, such that we need to be redeemed from sin and death through the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

I don't think it takes much knowledge or experience of the Episcopal Church to see the power that this 'American Religion' has over its life. If 'personal experience' has absolute authority, if finding the 'real me' is the central quest of human existence, then the individual requires complete freedom of choice unconstrained by any authority outside the self. A church inculturated in such a setting will affirm the individual quest in all its forms. Inclusion becomes a fundamental value for the church, the unconditional affirmation of all personal experience of whatever race, creed, gender, or sexuality. The purpose of the church is to validate those who have found their true identity and have thus found God. This would seem to be the thinking behind a recent orthodoxy of the Episcopal Church, the welcoming of all of whatever faith or none to communion. This seems to me a much more serious issue than the current disagreements over sexuality. By obviating the need for baptism, it leaves no space for the atoning power of Christ's death and resurrection, repentance, faith or holiness of life.

And if the individual is sure that no institution or system of belief can have any authority over the self, then it is equally true that no other church can have any authority over an autonomous national church. The attitude of the Episcopal Church is very firmly, 'No one can tell us what to do.' I remember particularly vividly the response of the American House of Bishops to the scheme proposed by the

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<sup>6</sup> 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', 1893.

<sup>7</sup> Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster) 1993.

Communion Primates in 2007 for a scheme to provide pastoral oversight for congregations alienated from their own bishops. The bishops said, 'It violates our founding principles as the Episcopal Church following our liberation from colonialism and the beginning of a life independent of the Church of England.'<sup>8</sup> These words and the rest of the reply seem to me an exercise in historical self-deception and wishful thinking.<sup>9</sup> The Anglican church in the American colonies had an ambiguous relationship with the Revolution – some supported it, but many were firmly opposed to it, remaining loyal to the British crown. The only 'liberation' the Revolution brought Episcopalians was from much of the church's financial assets and historic influence. Americans did not experience 'colonialism' in the same sense as African and Asian nations in the twentieth century. It is utter nonsense, I would argue, to equate the current American experience with that of African and Asian post-colonial societies. And yet if we take the statement at face-value, it must express how these Episcopalians feel about their situation. These rich and powerful Americans, the most privileged people on earth, identify their own experience of being oppressed and persecuted for their advocacy of gay rights with, for example, the experience of black South Africans under apartheid.

The further irony is, of course, that the Anglican Communion would not exist as it does without the efforts of the American Church to force the calling of the first Lambeth Conference in 1867. Their bishops wanted to have a chance to condemn the liberal theological tendency represented by *Essays and Reviews* and Biblical criticism and Bishop Colenso. Then they wanted the Communion to be mutually accountable and interdependent. Now the issues are different and the roles are reversed. Now it is the American bishops who resist claims of reciprocal obligation. So what is it about the Covenant that so offends and frightens them? Why does it have them running for their muskets to repel the new imperialists?

The theology of the Anglican Covenant is an expression of an approach to ecclesiology called conciliarism. This is the view that the authority of councils of the church is above that of popes. It emerged in the face of papal claims of supremacy in the middle ages, was submerged by the power of papal autocracy from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and only re-emerged in the Roman Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council. For Anglicans who regard themselves as both catholic and reformed, conciliarism has been an important foundational principle, a reflection of their accountability to the faith of the whole church. It takes us away from a centralised model of church authority to one where authority is dispersed throughout the Body of Christ; the body needs to speak in common to reflect its unity. This belief is reflected in the enunciation in the Covenant document of the venerable principle, 'what affects the communion of all should be decided by all'. It is an expression of what we mean by 'catholicity', that we orient our lives according to the unity of the whole Body.

In contemporary ecumenical discussions, the tradition of conciliar theology is represented by the prominence of 'communion' (in Greek *koinonia*) as the heart of the life of the church. The fellowship of the Church is inseparable from the life of God the Holy Trinity, the mutual self-giving love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The God who creates human beings in his own image and likeness creates us for communion with him and with one another in the Body of Christ. The communion principle is crucial for ecumenical relations for obvious reasons. If, as is commonly

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<sup>8</sup> For the full text of the response, see

[http://www.stlukes.net/Rectors\\_Reflections/PDF/House\\_of\\_Bishops\\_Response.pdf](http://www.stlukes.net/Rectors_Reflections/PDF/House_of_Bishops_Response.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> For an assessment of the Episcopalian response, see Peter Doll, 'When a founding myth becomes a weapon', *Church Times* 4 May 2007. p. 10. <http://churchtimes.co.uk/content.asp?id=38217>

acknowledged, all Christians are united by baptism in the Body of Christ, then it is impossible for any denomination to dismiss any other, to say of other Christians that they do not matter. Christ has broken down the dividing walls of human sin and estrangement and made us one (Eph 2.12-22). Therefore we have an obligation to listen to and belong to one another, to live as those who know themselves to be new creatures in God through baptism and the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Communion ecclesiology has been the foundation of the recent Anglican examination of their common life in the midst of disagreement. The Eames Commission Report of 1989/90, the Virginia Report of 1997, and the Windsor Report of 2004 have all insisted that communion principles are the only conceivable foundation for the renewal of the common life of the Anglican Communion, now falling prey to faction and schism. Rather than living as citizens of Christ's kingdom here on earth, the advance guard of his reign of justice, mercy, and peace, we are living as creatures in a Darwinian jungle, 'red in tooth and claw', using every available legal and illegal, political and verbal means to slash and savage one another, and all for what end – the right to claim the label 'Anglican'?

We do have a way out of this mess. Since we are caught up in the divine life, it ought to be second nature to us. The Covenant document points to the virtues of Ephesians 4, 'Faithfulness, honesty, gentleness, humility, patience, forgiveness and love itself, lived out in mutual deference and service (Mk 10.44-45) among the Church's people and through its ministries' (§3). These are the necessary corollaries of communion theology and living. Unfortunately there are seemingly insurmountable cultural and religious barriers to this mode of life. Communion theology assumes that hearing the Scriptures proclaimed is a communal practice, that the teachings of tradition and reason need to be communally discerned. But the assumptions of a common mind, a common listening, a common discerning in patience and love over time seem to be incompatible with the assumptions of what I've characterised here as 'American Religion'.

If that religion is fundamentally about an individual quest for the 'real me', about continually moving on to new frontiers, about the utter irrelevance of any authority outside the self, then reference to the authority of a common reading of Scripture, the common understanding of tradition, the common discernment of reason have very little meaning. So (from an American perspective) if our partners in the Gospel don't agree with our understanding of Scripture, tradition and reason, it becomes necessary to change the parameters of our relationship.

One approach has been, in place of responding to the challenge of mutual accountability, that American church leaders have claimed that communion theology puts an unacceptable priority on unity over truth and justice. Whose truth and whose justice are not issues up for debate. Nor is the idea that justice, truth, and communion might have something to say to one another. The American church is not prepared to accept further consultation or dialogue over this issue nor to wait for the rest of the church to catch up with its own understanding of the place of same-sex relationships in the life of the church. Whatever is acceptable and right in a particular American cultural context must be universally applicable to every other culture and context. There is more than an element of cultural imperialism in these American attitudes. Ironically, they resonate strongly with the gung-ho combination of domestic isolationism and foreign interventionism of American political life which so many American liberals deplore, and yet they don't seem to be able to see the parallels here.

Another way to skirt around the challenges of accountability has been to reformulate the understanding of the office of bishop. This is necessary because the

documents leading to the Covenant have expressed the role of bishop in entirely communal ways. The Virginia Report states, 'The episcopate is the primary instrument of Anglican unity' and that Episcopal oversight is properly personal, collegial, and communal. It is personal because 'Bishops are called by God, in and through the community of the faithful, to personify the tradition of the Gospel and the mission of the Church.' It is collegial because they share with other bishops the concerns of the local church and the community to the wider Church' and they 'bring back the concerns and decisions of the wider church to their local community'. It is communal, because bishops exercise their authority 'in synod', within the community of local churches and in communion with one another.

This understanding of the bishop's office is now being jettisoned by bishops around the communion, both on the left and on the right. American bishops on the left tend to justify this in the name of a 'prophetic' understanding of their office, giving expression to the doctrine of radical inclusion, stepping out ahead of the church in ways that are meant to expose its weaknesses and disobedience. Within the Episcopal Church, 'prophetic' action has become a favoured way of effecting change in place of prolonged investigation and theological debate. Likewise, bishops on the right have launched missions within the jurisdiction of other churches in defiance of collegiality in order to proclaim their own versions of truth and justice.

A yet further way of avoiding the claims of mutual accountability has been to hide behind a particular understanding of the autonomy of the national church. The definition of autonomy becomes a legalistic claim to the entire independence of the national church from influence or interference from any other church. The communion relationship is cast in political rather than ecclesial terms: rather than being engaged in a common discernment of truth, the sides must be willing to compromise; one side or other must admit being in the wrong, or else this will necessitate a break-up of the Communion. Many of the more conservative churches have expressed dismay that the Covenant offers no punitive sanctions to punish the Americans and so they want nothing more to do with it.

The Covenant understanding of autonomy is very different, expressed as 'autonomy in communion'. Autonomy in this sense does not imply unfettered freedom. Communion is not a human device for better relations. It is a gift from God and is therefore not something that human decision can break. Therefore, in this sense, 'autonomy' is a relational rather than an independent term. Each church is to be self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating – in this way they are autonomous. But according to the principle of communion, they are to exercise that autonomy in mutual subjection and with regard for the common good.

I've often heard people say that they are happy with the theology of the Covenant (sections 1—3) but that they part company with the fourth section – the one that has to do with the consequences of provincial churches not behaving in a collegial manner. This is seen as un-Anglican, as embracing a Roman-style centralising authority. And yet the worst punishment that is being suggested is suspension from participation in the instruments of communion. Given that these rebelling churches do not accept their accountability to these same instruments, this hardly seems like dire punishment.

The Covenant is not ultimately about punishing wayward churches. It is about giving them a choice. Do they want to be gathered into a closer, more mutually accountable relationship, or do they not? If they don't want to be closer, then inevitably their relationship with the whole will be more distant. One might compare this situation with that of the United Kingdom in relation to the European community.

If Britain chooses not to be part of the euro, its voice in the central financial councils will necessarily be less strong. Such choices have consequences.

Anglicans around the Communion often think about the Covenant in relation to their own church political objectives. It's often said, 'If we had to wait for the slowest members, women's ordination would not yet have happened.' In fact, over this issue the Episcopal Church was very careful to consult and accept the strictures of communion. That has not been the case in the more recent issue of same-sex relations. Here the Episcopal Church has in practice refused to be bound by communion-wide restrictions. I would argue that if the principles of communion are right, if the Gospel calls us to be subject and accountable to one another, then we must be obedient and patient and trust in the rightness of the outcome under God and through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It may mean that we won't have what we want when we want it. But if this way is Christ's way, it is the way of the cross. If the journey to unity is to be true to him, then it must be costly and sacrificial.

We find ourselves in a situation where we profess belief that Unity is what God is and what God does in the world, what he calls us to be, but that we find ourselves in danger of giving up on that Unity and accepting the disintegration of our Communion and of affirming our separation. I think the Covenant is worth our support despite its faults. We have no alternative programme. Those who wish to join it will do so because they wish to grow closer to others in the bonds of unity, not because it will enable them to punish wayward churches. They will join because communion is what God is and what he calls us to in Christ. Communion is our starting point, God's gift to us in Baptism.

The liberals of the American church begin not with communion but with the 'prophetic' call to (their understanding of) justice and truth. The conservatives of the developing world and their GAFCON allies begin with neither communion nor justice but with the church as the guardian of (what they understand to be) truth. The Covenant process stands between these two poles. It values highly justice and truth, but it sees these not as starting points but as fruits of communities that together tenderly nurture unity, communion, and holiness of life. If the Church lives the life of communion for which God created it, then unity, peace, justice and truth will manifest the integrity of our choice to the wider Church and the world.