

A multiplicity of covenants

1. The ordinary Christian can only be confused and distressed at the process of self-destruction within Anglicanism. But distress is not the complete response. We must try to see our duty, and to do that we must first understand. Do not imagine, in all of this, that salvation lies in documents. We have to start from that wise warning in the 39 Articles: “They also are to be had accursed that presume to say, That every man shall be saved by the Law or Sect which he professeth . . . for holy Scripture doth set out unto us only the name of Jesus Christ, whereby men must be saved.” This is as true within Christianity as in relation to other religions.
2. There is no historic foundation document for Anglicanism, unlike, say, the “Westminster Confession” for some Presbyterians. The 1662 Prayer Book (like its predecessors) had authority only in England and Wales; from very early days, other provinces had their own books. The 39 Articles have never been treated as authoritative by all provinces. Some revised them, some ignored them. The “Lambeth Quadrilateral” is only an opinion of a consultative body, not a constitutional document.
3. However, the last thirty years have seen several would-be constitutional documents for various parts of Anglicanism. It may fairly be said that all of them pay lip-service to the authority of scripture, with tradition and reason in support. However, in all cases the underlying issue is with what mind-set these authorities are approached. So we can take the ostensible authorities as given. Of course, in some cases the authority of scripture is taken much more seriously than this, almost amounting to the attempt to derive the whole nature of the church from the alleged positive teaching of scripture.
4. The oldest (1977) is the “Affirmation of St. Louis”. This is, strictly speaking, less of a constitution than a manifesto for a protest group, the “continuing Anglicans” who rejected innovations from the 1970s onwards. But it works quite like a constitution, since it defines a basic doctrinal posture (Early Church with an Anglican tinge, *and this priority of authorities is explicitly stated*) and moral posture (traditional). A major consequence of these postures is that innovation in the ministry (particularly women in the threefold ministry) is considered to be impossible. Indeed, innovation is impossible in any case where there is a clear ancient authority. The Affirmation also attempts to define acceptable forms of worship by listing some received prayer books – but by the nature of the originating meeting this list could not be comprehensive. Many “continuing Anglican” jurisdictions treat the Affirmation as a kind of foundation document, to which their own constitutions appeal. There is no mechanism for enforcement, but then each jurisdiction is committed to these stances, so there is no problem of enforcement. The Affirmation has not been able to achieve jurisdictional unity among those who accept it, but there is more mutual recognition in practice than is visible on the surface.
5. The next (2008) is the “Jerusalem Declaration” of the Global Anglican Futures Conference (GAFCON). This is much more of a constitution. The doctrinal posture is perhaps early reformation English (not *fully* accepting later, more Catholic, developments either in England or in some other provinces, though it does not either *quite* affirm that the Elizabethan settlement was a completed work incapable of improvement). The moral posture is traditional. Issues of ministry are seen as of lesser importance than the key Reformation doctrine of justification, so GAFCON does not formally exclude the possibility of ordaining women (though many of its members would be concerned to preserve the New Testament insistence on male “headship” and it appears that women bishops are not envisaged). GAFCON is a coalition of the willing, so enforcement is not an immediately practical issue, but because it has emerged in reaction to indiscipline, it affirms the need for enforcement mechanisms. It is not yet a jurisdiction, but it consists of a large number of Anglican provinces which might at some stage cease to have any practical relationships with official Anglicanism.

6. The official Anglican Communion is currently working on its own covenant, so it is not possible to analyse what postures its final form (if ever achieved) will contain. It is uncertain whether it will ever become open for adoption, and also how many provinces will in fact adopt it. It is doubtful whether it will contain any effective enforcement mechanisms. In practice, those provinces which reject the innovations of other provinces already tend to minimise practical relationships, if not to “invade” the “erring” provinces. Essentially, the tension between the autonomy of each province and the need for enough agreement for each province to recognise the others as authentically Christian has not been resolved.
7. In the USA and Canada, the “invasions” have now coalesced into a quasi-province “ACNA” of the GAFCON type and with support from key participants in GAFCON. It has managed to include within itself some much older Anglican schismatics (who thought the Episcopalians insufficiently Protestant) as well as some American members of Forward in Faith. While the central institutions of the official Anglican Communion are unlikely to recognise this province, many individual provinces have done so or will do. The Church of England seems to be forced to address the issue at a forthcoming synod, unless a way can be found to prevent the motion being discussed.
8. So far as England is concerned, there has recently been a launch by “Anglican Mainstream” of the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans in this country. This is a GAFCON body. It is not at this stage a new jurisdiction. It does not intend schism from the Church of England (but who ever intends schism?) However, it is an indication that, just as in North America, spiritual authority can be found outside the country. Some members of Forward in Faith UK were involved in the launch meeting; it seems that they found the experience disconcerting, since, as in America, Holy Orders seemed a very secondary issue to FOCA whereas it is the main issue to Forward in Faith.
9. It remains the case that some provinces and indeed theologians believe that the covenant approach is mistaken. This is often a cover for liberal innovation, but it could be more principled. Covenanting is not original in Anglicanism, as we have seen. Nor was it a feature of the early church. We have to remember that the early church flourished for three centuries without an agreed bible and without any other formula declaring its belief (until the original Nicene creed). There was a “rule of faith”, but different theologians of the time would give somewhat different accounts of it, and it did not exist as a single document (though it did imply very definite limits). Also, the emergence of creeds for use at baptism was a slow process, and these varied from diocese to diocese. However, the early church had quite strong disciplinary systems. Bishops could only be consecrated by other bishops, and met together in synods. A diocese which became heretical would therefore find itself isolated and unable to perpetuate itself. This worked quite well unless whole provinces became not, perhaps, heretical but certainly schismatic, as eventually happened. There was a very strong belief that the Church was and had to be One, and that this was a practical matter. Certainly, major churches might from time to time be in dispute, but this was usually resolved fairly quickly (helped, not infrequently, by the martyrdom of both bishops!) But the modern problem is precisely that whole provinces have adopted postures distinct from those of other provinces and from formerly universal Christianity, and do not recognise the obligation of practical unity (which includes mutual discipline) in the way that the early church did.

10. Not a few ordinary Anglican Christians simply want to be allowed to carry on as they were. This is perhaps a stronger motive in England, where conformity to the established religion has been seen as a positive value. For such, all covenanting seems a distraction. The problem is that mere continuity has ceased to be possible. There are fundamental differences about what Anglicanism (or indeed Christianity) is and how it should develop, and the authorities in each jurisdiction naturally act in accordance with their view. It is entirely reasonable that, if women can and should be ordained, then they should have the same opportunities for ministry as men, which means that there is no place for a dissident parish, or indeed individual. Similarly, if there are compelling reasons for changing the prayer book of a province, it is hard to see why these should only apply in certain places.
11. Many ordinary Anglican Christians would believe that worship is an important issue. Until quite recently, most prayer books in the Anglican Communion derived from one or other of two lines of descent. One line went through 1662 and 1928 (the latter book was often improved and adopted in other provinces, but remained both illegal and little used in England). The other line went through the Nonjuror, Scottish and eventually USA books (incorporating what the eighteenth century thought was primitive). The differences should not be exaggerated; they applied mainly to the communion service, and mostly not to the congregational aspects even of that. Unfortunately, the widespread revisions of the last forty years have removed much of even that limited coherence within official Anglicanism. Most of the provinces of the official Anglican Communion have produced radically revised prayer books. The Continuing bodies do offer older forms of worship, but for many Christians these are not continuity, since they have only known the various experimental or alternatives forms; for them, Continuing worship is not reversion to something once known or continuity, but a radical departure (both in the sense of major change and in the sense of returning to origins). The problem of discontinuity is worst in England, where hardly any parish had been using 1662 other than loosely before the series of “alternatives” and most Continuing bodies there, reflecting the experience of their adherents, do not therefore offer 1662 in any strict sense.
12. The search for unity encourages some self-definition, which is a not unrelated to the production of covenants. The problem of the ARCIC discussions was that neither Anglican nor Roman (post-Vatican 2) participants had a clear self-definition. Whatever was agreed (and though there was some fudging, there was also some genuine learning from each other and agreement), some theologians of both jurisdictions would be bound to repudiate it. Perhaps now the existence of the new Roman Catechism (a step which, ironically, Vatican 2 did not intend) introduces a little more certainty on the Roman side. That document is not of course a covenant, but it acts like one in so far as it may be assumed to cover what the ordinary member of that jurisdiction needs to know about all important topics.
13. It is revealing that the Traditional Anglican Communion, in asking Rome “Men and brethren, what must we do?” (Acts 2.37), could not describe its own position adequately in terms merely of historic Anglicanism plus the Affirmation of St. Louis, but used the Roman Catechism. This may seem odd behaviour, and it has been rather unthinkingly criticised. The problem which the Bishops of TAC faced is that there is so little *authoritative* self-definition or self-description in historical and indeed recent Anglicanism. The prayer books in use varied between the provinces, so did the status of the Articles and Homilies, and neither of these last two documents had been revised for centuries. Various theologians had attempted to produce summaries of what (their version of) Anglicanism was, but these had no official authority. The Lambeth Quadrilateral is a very thin document and again, which parts of Anglicanism does it bind? The Affirmation, while a good beginning, was of necessity quite a short document, a posture rather than a comprehensive survey.
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15. How indeed could we describe ourselves to an intelligent and theologically competent outsider? For this seems to be a necessary step. Excellent Palmer's "His Worthy Praise" is, as an explanation for Canadian Anglicans of what their last respectable prayer book implied for serious church members. But we do not have equivalent documents in all parts of TAC, and certainly no document for the whole body. So when Rome needed to know how TAC defined and described itself, there was, paradoxically, no better document available than the Roman Catechism. Either that, or spend years writing a comprehensive equivalent – as if TAC had the resources to do it! Of course, it was not a perfect answer. I do not imagine even the Pope considers the Roman Catechism a perfect document in itself. My private opinion remains that the use of the Roman Catechism was a least bad approach.
16. Christians committed to their membership of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church as a visible and effective Body may well ignore the official Anglican Communion's efforts, as these are merely covenant "lite", possibly intended to do no more than delay the inevitable splits for a few more years. They may well also accept that, whatever was the case in the past, the only *institutional* remedy (but of course the only *effective* remedy is submission to the guidance of the Spirit) for present problems is that greater stability and clarity which a covenant offers, or alternatively membership of a jurisdiction which itself provides that greater stability and clarity. Certainly, there has been a development from the Rule of Faith to the modern covenants, but it is hard to see how this fundamentally changes the nature of the Church. Patristic scholars might well comment that Origen's "De Principiis" (if only we had it as he wrote it) is itself a long and precise document about the nature and limits of Church teaching. The need to describe (and to set limits) already existed in the third century. It is not a modern innovation.
17. We believe that God was active in Anglicanism, so it is not foolish to seek an Anglican way forward. But which? It is concerning that there are two serious approaches to Anglican covenanting (St. Louis and GAFCON) and that there is no sign of reconciliation between them, though GAFCON pointedly held itself open to bodies discountenanced by official Anglicanism (and ACNA has received some of them). On the other hand, those who accept the discipline of St. Louis did not involve themselves in ACNA. Essentially, the question is whether there was a doctrinally perfected reformation in the sixteenth century, so that all we have to do is to find it and apply it to our current circumstances? If so, then GAFCON might be right (at least about the starting point). If not (and my opinion is that Anglicanism has always been a work in progress until the point at which it collapsed), then we are called to go back to the last sound point and the sound teaching within it, and then to find a careful way forward. My opinion is that before the disasters of the 1970s and later, Anglicanism was discovering both its strengths and its limits, and its need to be well rooted in the early church. The Affirmation is right as a protest and as a sound starting point; but it cannot remove the need to go forward.
18. Maybe the differences of approach have always existed in Anglicanism – that is the contention of Aidan Nichols OP "The Panther and the Hind". If so, it may indeed be better for everybody to recognise that the time has come for choosing between the relatively solid options. Either is better than drift, though I believe that the Affirmation of St. Louis better reflects the way relatively sound Anglicanism was developing in the years before the triumph of liberalism.
19. And after all this, never forget that our salvation is in the Name of Christ, and consists not in becoming ever more skilled in dissecting documents, but in "Nearer my God to Thee, Nearer to Thee."