

Covenanting

Vaughan House, Westminster, June 2005

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In 2003, the Church of England and the Methodist Church of Great Britain agreed a covenant with each other. It involved a series of mutual affirmations and commitments, amongst them a commitment to work towards removing the remaining barriers to full communion and interchangeable ministry.

I do not propose to examine all the affirmations and commitments, much less the detailed examination of the positions of the two churches as enshrined in the report accompanying the original proposals. Rather, I want to look at the underlying spirituality implied in the use of the term covenant and stress its applicability in other comparable situations where particular churches, having arrived at a particular stage in their ecumenical pilgrimage, now feel called to commit themselves to a journey of growing together in the hope and belief that the final destination must be one of full communion in faith, life and ministry even if the precise steps to be taken to allow this remain as yet unclear and unagreed. I would argue the development of some sort of committed covenantal relationship is integral to the process by which any grouping of partner churches can recognise unity as both gift and calling. Indeed, I would argue that the signing of a covenant to journey towards greater unity represents not so much a totally new step as much as a recognition of a situation that already exists as a result of God's common gracious calling of all His people of whatever denomination. What is new is the recognition of this as necessitating specific action and response.

The term covenant was apparently only adopted at a relatively late stage in the discussions that eventually led to the proposals published in 2001 and finally

adopted in 2003. There is little theological reflection within the document itself; rather more has emerged subsequently thanks to the work of the Joint Implementation Commission and some reflection within the structures of Churches Together in England. The term has basic biblical resonances and particular ones for Methodists flowing from the Methodist tradition of the annual Covenant service, a tradition dating back to the time of the Wesleys in which Methodists solemnly recommit themselves to the Lord in a manner that has something in common with the renewal of baptismal vows within the Roman Catholic tradition.

In the Foreword, we read.

‘The language of Covenant is important...In Scripture, God’s covenant is made with His people by grace. It involves forgiveness and healing. It survives the ups and downs of human nature and experience, for it is God who calls and enables and keeps faith’.

There is a sense in which the CTE Enabling Group were glossing this paragraph when they wrote.

‘Covenant implies a willingness to remain faithful even when the other partner is faithless and this distinguishes it from a contract. Covenant is both communal and individual-each church and its members. Covenant implies metanoia: reflection, repentance, a willingness to change and to be entirely open to the other’.

The JIC emphasises the faithfulness of God to his covenants with the people of Israel despite their unfaithfulness. God does not give up on his commitments nor should churches, which are called to be churches of grace give up on their commitments to each other. The commitment is intended to be irrevocable. It is made in the clear sighted recognition of the fallibility and weakness of both partner churches but also in the greater belief in the enabling grace of God which can triumph even within the context of human weakness.

During the covenanting process, an Anglican priest expressed astonishment to me that Methodists should want to tie themselves to a church in as chaotic a state as the contemporary Church of England. I replied that we should do so not despite that but in a very real sense because of the biblical call to bear one another's burdens. Deep within the Methodist understanding of koinonia and fellowship is the understanding that it is a matter of helping each other along. We cannot choose our partners. Christ chooses them for us and we cannot disown or ignore the Church of England that He still owns. Both our churches need each other.

The Covenant relationship must be one in which we give not according to any understanding or merit. Two incidents epitomise for me the right and the wrong approach to the subject. At about the time of the conclusion of the accord, the Bishop of London solemnly tore up a series of anti-Methodist tracts written at the time of the original revival, thereby symbolising his renunciation of past prejudice on the part of Anglicans against Methodism. A prominent Methodist minister was present and applauded the action; however, subsequently he told me that there had been far more anti-Methodist prejudice for Anglicans to repent of than vice-versa. I don't know how he arrived at this calculation. Speaking purely as an historian, I should say it was very difficult to quantify. Ecumenically, however, it seemed to me to show an attitude contrary to that commended by Paul, viz- love keeps no score of wrongs. What each church is called to do with the Ecumenical Movement, and above all, within a confessedly covenantal relationship is to confess its own sins not to harp on those of others. Thus, it is for Anglicans to do as the Bishop of London has done and for Methodists to repent of past sins of prejudice against Anglicans, of which there have certainly been many!

Covenanting involves risk, as does all love supremely that of God the Father who was prepared for the sake of redemption to risk even the most precious thing, the life of His only beloved Son; if we cannot take risks, we should not be in this business. The 1936 version of the Methodist Covenant service included amongst its penitential sentences the following,

'If we have made no ventures in fellowship...if we have not sought reconciliation... have mercy on us and forgive us, O Lord.

If in his covenant grace, God made himself vulnerable, who are we to hold back from vulnerability. I am sure that many Anglicans and Methodists feel vulnerable within the Covenant relationship. There are those Methodists who fear being swamped by a church with four times the active membership and one which enjoys an even greater disparity in many key resources. Will the Methodist types of Christian living survive? The answer is that we have to trust the ability of the Church of England to be faithful to the joint promises made about the harvesting of the joint resources of both our traditions. We have to trust that they will endeavour faithfully to discern what it is that they should receive from Methodism to their own enrichment. Conversely, there are Anglicans, particularly of the traditionalist Catholic school who fear that their witness may be disregarded in a church where the liberal and evangelical elements may be enhanced by the Methodist presence. One flying bishop told me that he had voted for the Covenant because he believed it objectively right and God's will, but that, nevertheless, he had felt a bit like the proverbial turkey voting for Christmas. These fears are understandable but we have to remember that perfect love casts out fear. Commenting on Col 2:2, that our hearts must be 'knit together in love unto the riches of the full assurance of understanding' the classical Wesleyan theologian, Benjamin Gregory states that the order is to love first and then to understand. We are called as Wesley put it always to love alike even where we cannot think alike. Had he lived in the present era and witnessed some of the extraordinary developments in ecumenical dialogue and consensus, I think Mr W. might have conceded that sometimes the loving alike has actually enabled us to think more fully alike even though that process is far from complete.

At the end of their statement, and after relating some very real, if still patchy and partial advances in the developing Covenant relationship, the JIC list eight qualities as essential to a good covenanting relationship. They are as follows.

Patience. The JIC say. This is essential. The more deeply we get to know each other, the more we will need to be honest both about the spiritual riches with which we have been entrusted and the faults and flaws in ourselves from which we need to be delivered. Feelings of frustration will need to be matched by penitence'.

Vows are for living. 'Vows mark the beginning of a journey, of a life within a committed relationship. Perhaps we are not just called to 'implement' an Anglican-Methodist Covenant but to learn what it means to live it'.

Accepting 'change is inevitable'. The Covenant relationship is bound to lead to changes, even if their exact nature cannot be forecast. 'It is hard to imagine any significant mutual giving and receiving in a covenant relationship if none of the partners notices any change in the way they order their affairs'. The JIC point out that the Methodist understanding of Covenant involves the concept of God's transforming us as he works through us.

Covenanting is deeply rewarding – but costly. In particular, it means that we have to take each other into account in decision making, a point already affirmed in the fifth commitment. 'We commit ourselves to listen to each other and to take account of each others' concerns especially in areas that affect our relationship as churches'. We need, I think to put it even more strongly than this. We need to say to each other as Ruth did to Naomi, 'Thy people shall be my people'. It is not a matter of ceasing to be what we are as Anglicans and Methodists; it is a matter of acquiring another belonging so that Methodists come to experience Anglicanism at depth and Anglicans Methodism in the same way.

Covenant living involves dynamic tension. Joy in what we have already has to be balanced by longing for what we have yet to receive.

We are in it for the long term. The JIC stress that the Covenant is not a 'quick fix merger' but that it is to be persisted with however long it takes us to travel to the next stage.

Cherishing appropriate diversity. Convergence 'may not and perhaps should not lead to a greater uniformity of practice. It may lead us instead to cherish a necessary and enriching diversity.' One might stress here that there should be no absolute presumptions; in some matters, we might be led to

accept an even greater diversity than exists at the moment; in others we may feel to called to somewhat more uniformity; it all depends on the discernment into which we are led.

Accepting 'our covenant will be shaped by a purpose beyond itself'. Our Covenant is not, of course, an end in itself, but it serves the greater unity of the entire Church which, in its turn, serves the cause of God's kingdom. The JIC accept that the understanding of the relationship and its practical implications will be subject to development.

'Insights from Scripture may yet challenge our two churches to express more clearly how our covenant commitment serves God's kingdom purpose beyond ourselves. Clues may lie in the language of reconciliation, of healing, of self-emptying, of hospitality'.

I think to this list, I would add genuine humility, the humility that accepts that, as a result of our previous estrangement, every church has suffered some distortion within the development within it of the Apostolic Tradition. This may not be primarily a matter of doctrinal deficiency or heresy in the traditional formal sense; it is perhaps far more likely to be a matter of a lack of balance. Thus, the great Abbe Paul Couturier recognised that, as a result of the reactive nature of the Counter-Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church had lost the habit of encouraging serious study of Scripture amongst its lay members, a deficiency which has been largely remedied since Vatican II. In coming together (as ARCIC pointed out) we need to see what it is that we need to re-receive as result of either neglect of aspects of the tradition or failure to receive them adequately in the first place.

At a more positive level, we need to acknowledge what the late Pope John Paul II described, in *Ut Unum Sint*, as the rich embellishment of the *koinonia* which has occurred within the separated traditions despite the objective sin of schism. We all need to catch up with what has been going on fruitfully elsewhere.

We need that virtue that William Shrewsbury referred to as 'disinterestedness', of rejoicing in new gifts of the Spirit wherever and in what ever church they may be found. It is only with such humility that we will be able to take place in a genuinely enriching process of reception and find together the form of unity that Christ wills for us today.

Alongside this necessary humility comes the recognition that we are in fact not two or more churches but one and the same Church, having the same Lord, the same Gospel to proclaim and celebrating the one eucharist of the one Church. It is this that necessarily makes us reach out to one another. The Wesleyan ecclesiologist, Benjamin Gregory argued that the unity and holiness of the Church necessarily go hand in hand. One of his modern successors, Rex Kissack wrote of how the unity of the Church is the necessary corporate consequence of the doctrine of Christian perfection.

The teaching of Vatican II reminds us of the ongoing eschatological nature of the Church's pilgrimage. It continues to meditate upon the word of God until all the promises of God are fulfilled in her. The catholicity of the Church is an ever expanding phenomenon. Of course, there are ups and downs in this progress,. Realism means that we must accept that the living of the Covenant process (a term the JIC rightly prefer to the rather bureaucratic/legalistic term 'implementation') will be imperfect and may show far more vigour in certain areas than others. Nevertheless, this must not prevent us from responding as fully as in us lies both to the specific commitments within the Covenant and to the spirit undergirding it which I hope will inspire other churches. It has been repeatedly stated by both the Church of England and British Methodism that neither of us has any desire to create an exclusive relationship or to lessen in any way our search for closer co-operation and ultimate unity with other churches. At every stage, key partner churches have been invited to comment on the developments and have been kept fully informed.

Our ultimate obligation is to the one Church of Christ, to the unity that he wills. What this involves for both our churches in terms of repentance, renewal and mutual reception remains yet to be worked out.