

Churchman

EDITORIAL

A Solemn League and Covenant

History has a wonderful way of playing tricks on us. Back in 1638, the Church of Scotland's general assembly tore up the episcopal system of government which had been imposed on the church following the accession of King James VI to the English throne in 1603, and the people bound themselves to defend presbyterianism with their blood. In 1643 this covenant was imposed on England as well, in the expectation that it would lead to a union of the godly in the great struggle for the right forms of doctrine and worship throughout the British Isles. But as we all know, the tide eventually turned, and after 1660 all clergymen were required to abjure the covenant as a precondition for being admitted to a living. What had previously been a bond uniting true believers now became a mark of infamy, which all right-minded people were expected not merely to reject but to execrate. In Scotland there was a sufficiently large number of committed Covenanters to make this turn of the wheel more awkward than it was elsewhere, and in 1690 they had their reward. Episcopacy was abolished in that country, presbyterianism (complete with the Westminster Confession of 1647) was made the national religion and the covenant entered the national mythology, where it still remains.

Since that time, covenanting has generally been associated with dissent—with Methodism, for example, where the annual covenanting service remains one of the most moving expressions of John Wesley's Christian idealism. And who can forget Ulster, where in 1912 virtually the entire adult male Protestant population signed a covenant, vowing to resist (by force if necessary) the implementation of a home rule government with an inbuilt Catholic majority? In recent years however, thanks mainly to the Inland Revenue, covenanting has acquired a more benign appearance. Perhaps it is the financial benefit which many churches and charitable organisations have enjoyed over the past few decades which has enabled the great and good of the Anglican Communion to suggest that the process of covenanting might now be used to shore up an episcopal fellowship, rather than to destroy it!

For as the Windsor Report on (inter-Anglican) communion makes clear, we have reached the point where the future of our common life as Anglicans is very much at risk. There have been crises in the past—most recently over the ordination of women to the presbyterate and later their consecration to the episcopate—but the dissension provoked by issues related to homosexual practice is quite unprecedented. The Report gives a lengthy recapitulation of the debates about women, pointing out how they differ from the difficulties currently before us and yet somehow seem to resemble them as well. It is important to read these paragraphs carefully, not least because they tend to gloss over certain unpleasant facts which might have all too much bearing on the present situation. For example, although it is pointed out that the member churches of the Anglican Communion eventually agreed to accept differences of practice over the ordination and consecration of women, it is not stated very clearly that the initial moves in that direction were quite uncanonical, and flew in the face of the established consensus at the time. The compromise over women was hammered out only after some member churches—notably the American Episcopal Church—had already gone their own way and indicated that there would be no turning back. The others backed off and agreed to accept the right of individual national churches and provinces to decide for themselves what to do in this case. The result is a situation in which there are now ordained priests and consecrated bishops whose ministry is unacceptable in other parts of the Communion, but who are nevertheless permitted to carry on. The consecration of women bishops in some places meant that at the 1998 Lambeth Conference there were bishops present who were not in communion with one another. But in spite of that, everybody smiled for the group photograph and went home, pleased that once again the Anglican Communion had demonstrated its unity in diversity!

The subtext here is that those who reject women's ordination are a dying breed who can be allowed to fade out gracefully over time, in an amorphous process known as 'reception'. Those dissenters who live in churches where provision has been made for women's ordination know only too well what this means. They are gradually being squeezed out as a younger generation of clergy is carefully selected on the basis of political correctness. Perhaps a few diehard eccentrics will be allowed to survive here and there, but the news that in 2005 the number of female ordinands in the Church of England will surpass the number of males will reassure those whose tolerance does not extend to those

who support a New Testament understanding of Christian ministry, and the general trend looks set to continue towards its own fulfilment.

These observations will seem to some to be quite irrelevant to the homosexuality debate, and the Windsor Report gives some ground for that view. But the fact remains that the Archbishop of Armagh and his fellow commissioners spent rather longer on the women's question than one might expect if the issue really was immaterial to the current discussion, and the suspicion must be that it is the similarities, rather than the differences between the two cases which they expect to weigh more heavily in the longer term. On the positive side, it is true that they have censured the American Episcopal Church (ECUSA) and the Canadian diocese of New Westminster for having taken steps which have caused grave offence to most of the rest of the Anglican Communion. It is also true that they have invited those involved to reconsider their positions and to withdraw from Communion events if their conscience so dictates. They have even suggested that the Archbishop of Canterbury should exercise extreme caution in issuing invitations to Gene Robinson (the so-called 'bishop' of New Hampshire) to attend meetings involving prelates from other provinces. For good measure they have proposed a moratorium on future consecrations of such people until such time as there is a wider agreement among the different churches, which they indicate may take a good deal longer than was the case with women's ordination.

If the Anglican Communion were a club of English (and Irish) gentlemen, the message would be clear. ECUSA has broken the rules and ought to withdraw in order to avoid the unpleasantness of having to be expelled. It is somewhat reminiscent of South Africa's departure from the Commonwealth in 1961, when the apartheid government of Dr. Verwoerd withdrew its membership before being unceremoniously kicked out of the organisation. Thirty-three years later (and after an all-important change of régime) South Africa was back in the Commonwealth as a major player, so ECUSA need not be written off for ever. From the point of view of orthodox Anglicans, this is the least awful scenario, and there must be many who are hoping that ECUSA will take the hint and leave before causing further embarrassment.

Unfortunately, English and Irish gentlemen are thin on the ground in the Anglican Communion, and virtually non-existent in ECUSA's house of bishops.

Those who are not used to thinking in terms of club rules are just as likely to focus on what was not said in the Report as on what was. The Report's most glaring omission is that nowhere did it say (or even hint) that Gene Robinson's consecration should be annulled. Yet for many people around the world, that is the heart of the matter—is he a true bishop or not? If he is, his exclusion from the wider Communion is anomalous and in time it will surely come to look unacceptable. If he is not, then why is the American Episcopal Church still regarded as being part of the Anglican Communion? Those who do not recognise him as a bishop believe that he is living in a state of open and unconfessed sin (a word not found in the Windsor Report) which no amount of diplomatic finessing can alter. They also believe that no-one in Mr Robinson's position should be ordained to any order in the church, and that those who are like him should be defrocked. Not a word was said in the Report about that! Instead, it was casually stated that divorce and remarriage, though inadmissible in many provinces, cannot be regarded as a bar to communion because there are already a number of bishops (including Mr. Robinson, of course) who are already in that situation! The fact that most, if not all, of these are in ECUSA is not mentioned! Thus we find that, far from censuring homosexual practice, the Windsor Report actually sanctions another form of sexual immorality on the ground that so far it has failed to attract attention.

The basic difficulty we face is that on the one side are those who think that dialogue will eventually produce consensus and agreement—which is subtly assumed to mean that homosexual practice will be accepted as legitimate—and those who believe that this is an issue of truth which is not susceptible to that kind of treatment. Even if everyone in the church were prepared to accept a practising homosexual priest, his conduct would still be wrong in the sight of God, and any 'communion' there might be would be a fellowship of the disobedient. In the present situation, there is only one thing which can be regarded as absolutely certain. This is that Mr. Robinson and his supporters will not give an inch. Anyone who thinks otherwise is merely fooling himself—these people have not campaigned as long and as hard as they have, merely to express regret for the hurt which they have caused to their opponents. They have shown their contempt for others so consistently and so often that it is incredible that there can still be people who think that they may somehow be persuaded to change their minds—not to mention their behaviour. Amazingly, the Windsor Report documents all this, but still manages to fly in the face of

reality and express a hope that this may be so—a lack of realism which speaks volumes.

The Report will have no effect on the liberals in the church, who will continue to do whatever they can get away with and dare the rest of us to do something about it if we can. Its real aim is to shut the conservatives up by giving them something which appears to lean in their direction without actually committing anyone to their point of view. Here the covenant idea can be seen for what it is—a master-stroke of deception, so cunning that probably most (if not all) of the conservative members of the Lambeth Commission fell for it without realising what was really going on. It is quite possible that all the Communion's member churches will sign up to such a document, and that many will hail it as a real breakthrough towards future harmony and unity. It will be heralded in fact as a weapon for the godly to use in their struggle for peace and harmony in the church, based (as they see it) on a rightly-ordered church polity. It may even become compulsory for everyone to sign on to it—a clever device which will at least ensure that no more African archbishops go parish-hunting in America! But will it solve the problem in a way which conservatives will find acceptable? Of course not! ECUSA is quite capable of signing up to a declaration of intent and then doing the exact opposite—as happened at the 2003 General Convention when (as the Windsor Report actually reminds us) the majority accepted the legitimacy of experimenting with rites for same-sex blessings, even though a working party had pointed out only four months beforehand that such a move would split the church and should be avoided! We are dealing in ECUSA with a primate who could attend the last Primates' Meeting, sign the agreed statement and then denounce it as he walked out of the room a few minutes later. He signed (he said) in order to affirm his sense of belonging to the wider fellowship—and then carried on regardless. The covenant, if it ever materialises, will doubtless be treated in exactly the same way—a text to be affirmed one minute and ignored (or execrated) the next. It looks very much as if the liberals will perform a feat which our seventeenth-century forbears found impossible—they will combine the piety of 1643 with the politics of 1660 and call it the 'reconciliation' of diverse and even incompatible views—another triumph for the Anglican Communion!

What can those who are truly godly do in the face of such blatant disregard for everything which allows a normal society of people, not to mention a Christian

church, to operate? We can only take one step at a time, and the first step in this instance is not to be fooled by what appears to be a call for orthodoxy but which is in fact a device for preventing the orthodox from doing anything serious about uprooting heresy from the church. Given the innate tendency of so many conservative people to allow themselves to be hoodwinked, this task must be given top priority. Evangelicals in particular, know only too well how their efforts can be undermined by those who claim to share their position but who in fact emasculate it in every committee meeting and assembly. Understanding the issues and developing a nose for political trickery (without participating in it, of course) are vital if there is to be any hope of countering the homosexual advance. We are dealing here with an issue which touches the heart of the Biblical doctrine of creation. Abandon that, and the Gospel becomes simply unintelligible.

The second step is to recall the wider Communion to the reality that homosexual practice is a sin which cannot be tolerated in any member of the church, and certainly not in one of its ordained clergy. This will be much harder to do and is certain to provoke furious opposition, especially in Western countries where the liberal establishment has entrenched itself so deeply in church affairs. Nobody likes to be unpleasant, but if we fail to do this we shall be guilty of denying the truth and perhaps even of concealing the real reason why we cannot accept what has been going on in ECUSA and elsewhere. That is the challenge facing us, and we must hope and pray that our leaders will realise the gravity of the situation we face and rise to the occasion in a way that they have all too often sadly failed to do in the past.

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