

# Canon, Covenant, and Rule of Faith – The Use of Scripture in Communion

## *Biblical Theological Reflection and the Rule of Faith: Threshold Considerations*

In order both to set limits and for clarity's sake—themes to which I shall return—the present essay will *undertake theological reflection on covenant and the appropriateness of using this term for work presently before us in the Anglican Communion*. This requires some threshold consideration. By 'theological reflection' I mean, giving a comprehensive account of Scripture with concern for its total, mutually-informing witness. I take this to be the concern of one of the Articles, with a long prior history, that scripture be read in such a way that its portions be not repugnant, one with another. The same concern also animates what in our present period is called 'canonical reading.'<sup>1</sup>

It will be a basic contention of the present essay that this hermeneutical caution is traceable to the rule (*kanon; regula*) of faith (*regula fidei*) in the early church.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in the period of the formation and consolidation of New Testament writings and especially relevant because of the character of that 'work-in-progress,' the rule grounds Christian convictions about the nature of God in Christ in the witness of the stable, inherited scriptures of Israel. The rule of faith is an appeal to the total witness of scripture,<sup>3</sup> especially the Old Testament, as constituting the speech and work of the selfsame Living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in Israel and in the Apostolic witness to Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>1</sup> C. Seitz, "Biblical Authority in the Late Twentieth Century," *Word Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 83-101.

<sup>2</sup> The coincidence of 'canon' (as in 'rule of faith') and 'canon' (as in scriptural/canonical witness) is worth exploring, but minimally it should be stressed that authority in bounded diversity—persons of the Trinity and parts of the canon—are related phenomena. The Rule of Faith is not a general (catholic or evangelical) piety nor a formalized creedal deposit, but rather a declaration arising from scripture that faith has an ordered character, based upon the activity of God (his economy) and the character of his being (his ontology) an actor (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and so coherent across the scriptures of Israel and the emerging NT witness in accordance with it. For thorough bibliography see P. Blowers, "The *Regula Fidei* and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith," *Pro Ecclesia* 6 (1997) 199-228. On the fundamental role of the Old Testament in the Rule, see B. Hägglund, "Die Bedeutung der 'regula fidei' als Grundlage theologischer Aussagen," *Studia Theologica* 11 (1957) 1-44.

<sup>3</sup> "Now, with regard to this rule of faith—that we may from this point acknowledge what it is which we defend—it is, you must know, that which prescribes the belief that there is one only God, and that He is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through His own Word, first of all sent forth; that this Word is called His Son, *and*, under the name of God, was seen "in diverse manners" by the patriarchs, heard at all times in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, and, being born of her, went forth as Jesus Christ; thenceforth He preached the new law and the new promise of the kingdom of heaven, worked miracles; having been crucified, He rose again the third day; (then) having ascended into the heavens, He sat at the right hand of the Father; sent instead of Himself the Power of the Holy Ghost to lead such as believe; will come with glory to take the saints to the enjoyment of everlasting life and of the heavenly promises, and to condemn the wicked to everlasting fire, after the resurrection of both these classes shall have happened, together with the restoration of their flesh" (Tertullian, "The Prescription Against Heretics," *Ante-Nicene Christian Library* [Vol. XV.2; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1870] 16-17).

This apostolic witness is coming to form in the canonical writings of the New Testament, soon to be ranged alongside the Scriptures of Israel, and assuming an authority in accordance with them.<sup>4</sup> As Tertullian aptly saw in his shrewd analysis of heresy, the rule of faith has its alternative in the rule of skill, or cleverness, in handling the same scriptures in a way which makes their parts compete, excludes texts, or gives false proportion to their total voice.<sup>5</sup>

If this be the case, the remedy when confronting distortion or false interpretation in Christian preaching and teaching, for Tertullian, will not be the construction of ‘confessions’ or an external doctrinal scaffolding. Rather, he insists the church must be very clear about the nature of heresy and its providential role, and how heresy deforms and mishears the scriptures because lacking an exegetical pattern or guideline grounded in the rule of faith. The rule is not a confession but *a theological conviction about God in Christ with distinct exegetical implications for how scripture is to be heard in its total, mutually reinforcing witness*. When the rule of faith—as a basic statement of the relation between the work of God in creation and in Israel, with the work of God in Jesus Christ and the Church—is not animating the handling of scripture, heresy emerges to warn the church of the seriousness of its charge to guard the faith as handed on in the dual witness of prophet and apostle. It points the church to the necessity of the rule of faith in response to scripture’s plain sense as indispensable for stewarding the church’s joyful and obedient reception of the witness of prophet and apostle.<sup>6</sup> The rule declares scripture’s clarity and enjoins a theological reading tuned to scripture’s subject: the Triune God.

I shall have more to say about this in a later section, but it is an important lens on any reflection on covenant from the standpoint of the Bible’s total witness. It also makes clear that the work of the Holy Spirit in the church’s use of Holy Scripture is not merely identification (or not) with this or that single moment in scripture’s economic unfolding. Covenant exists within a broad network of affiliation and must be appreciated on these same terms: the dynamic of its issuance and re-issuance prevents its restriction to a single

---

<sup>4</sup> “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures [the Old Testament] we might have hope” (Rom 15:4). “The Christian Bible is not a completely new formation. Through its ‘*Old Testament*’ it is linked with Judaism, whose ‘Scriptures’ Christianity took over at the moment of its emergence, and has retained ever since. This was something that happened long before it was possible to speak of a ‘New Testament’” (Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* [London: Adam & Charles Black, 1972]. *Die Entstehung der Christlichen Bibel* [J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 1968]). See also C Seitz, *Word Without End* and “Two Testaments and the Failure of One Tradition-History,” *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 35-48.

<sup>5</sup> “Thy faith,” He says, “hath saved thee” (Luke xviii. 42) not *observe* your skill (*Exercitatio*) in the Scriptures. Now, faith has been deposited in the rule; it has a law, and (in the observance thereof) salvation. Skill (*Exercitatio*), however, consists in curious art, having for its glory simply the readiness that comes from knack (*De peritiæ studio*). Let such curious art give place to faith; let such glory yield to salvation” (“Prescription,” 18).

<sup>6</sup> “‘Prophets and Apostles’: The Conjunction of the Two Terms before Irenaeus,” in *Texts and Testaments: Critical Essays on the Bible and the Early Church Fathers* (W.E. March, ed.; San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1980) 109-134.

moment or specific episode of application, and encourages a dynamic reapplication in our own day and for the purposes of God in our own time.

The church finds its identity and mission by hearing Scripture as a total, dual witness of prophet and apostle, now informing in that dual form a fresh appraisal of the church's life under the providence of God, who called Israel, sent the Son, and promised to be with the church living in obedience to the Son's commands. The church's place, then, is not *alongside/within* the apostolic witness, or *beyond* the prophetic witness, but *properly aligned under them both*. Each witness speaks God's word of address and testimony in accordance with the idiom proper to its respective Testament, and it is the work of God the Holy Spirit to bring this testimony and address before the church, in Christ. The rule, in short, is a Trinitarian application at the level of exegesis and address of the subject matter, or subject, of Christian Scripture, Old and New Testaments, that is, God in Christ.<sup>7</sup>

In detail and in dynamic reapplication, covenant is very much at home within the Old Testament. The New Testament refers and defers to this covenant particularity, and does

---

<sup>7</sup> In order to preclude the criteria by which technical scholars determined canonicity in the formative period of the NT being applied (wrongly as the argument goes) from the OT to the NT, Allert has inserted in its place an appeal to the 'Rule of Faith.' This rule, consequently, lacks any basis in the textual pressure from an anterior witness on the formation of basic Christian doctrine in the period in question – the 'accordance with the scriptures' of NT language, or the consistent appeal to the role of the scriptures (OT) in encouraging the faithful and in guiding the church's reflection on the work of God in Christ, as this is seen in the NT (Rom 15:4; 1 Tim 4:13; 2 Tim 3:14-15). The 'rule of faith' becomes instead a matter of anterior pre-creedal 'confession,' guiding the church's reflection on the canonicity of the NT and claims being made about the books that constitute it. This argument is meant to dislodge the modern evangelical claims of inspiration and inerrancy, but at the cost of evaporating the crucial role of the OT in the period of early Christian confession. Allert writes at one point, "Before there was even Scripture, there was faith; the early church did not set the limits of the scriptural canon as the paramount task of nascent Christianity. Its first goal was the settle the content of faith, and it did this using means other than the Bible" (*A High View of Scripture? The Authority of the Bible and the Formation of the New Testament Canon* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007] 82). He is correct that Tertullian and others judged heresy as energized by the same scripture held in common with the orthodox, and that the rule of faith was necessary. But the rule is not external to scripture; it is an argument made on the basis of scripture's total sense about the theological subject of scripture, and the Old Testament's anterior position is critical in appreciating this because the church was faced with an inheritance it confessed was about Christ from eternity. Tertullian is very clear at this point on the centrality of the scriptural inheritance for the rule's theological rationale. Among others, see the compact account of D. Farkasfalvy, "The Role and Use of Old Testament Scriptures in the Apostolic Church," in *The Formation of the New Testament Canon: An Ecumenical Approach* (W.R. Farmer and D.M. Farkasfalvy, eds.; New York, Ramsey, Toronto: Paulist Press, 1983) 103-110.

Appeals to 'rule of faith' in other recent sources can be vague and difficult to assess (see essays in E. Davis, ed., *The Art of Reading Scripture* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003]). In some cases what is apparently meant is on the order of Allert's 'faith' – this opposed to a faulty Biblicism or a disproportionate 'scripture alone' idea. Alternatively, it has been argued strongly that appeal to the rule of faith makes vague and 'churchy' the plain sense of scripture, especially the Old Testament (Goldingay). We would share the concern if this was in fact what the rule of faith was in the early (pre-Nicene) church. On our view, Childs, Hagglund, Von Campenhausen, Farkasfalvy and others have the more precise conceptuality, because they see the crucial role of the Old Testament in the period during which the NT is a work-in-progress, and the Old Testament is the primary witness to the claims of Christ made on the basis of 'the scriptures.'

not introduce a fresh form in order to imitate or replace what has been given on the same terms. Instead it allows the dynamic of the original form to come to its proper and prophetically determined accordance. Any churchly application of the covenant quite rightly deals both with the *gracious provision of form*, such as the Old Testament supplies, and also the *concluding dynamic* the New Testament sees as accorded and fulfilled in Christ. Churchly application of the covenant of God in Christ does not assume a one-after-the-other logic of increasing spiritualization and de-particularization, but a figural application, in God the Holy Spirit, of the wisdom of God's covenant in election in Israel and in extension to the nations in Christ *both*. Old Testament and New Testament offer a mutually informing, dual witness, and in the mystery of that witness the church stands before the mystery of God's economic and eternal reality *both*.

Covenant, then, is the concrete life of God in Christ, with Israel and in apostolic extension, made manifest for the church's application under the power of the Holy Spirit, gaining its life and drawing its conforming power by attention to God's Holy Word: Two Testaments, One Scripture. This is the Rule of Faith: dynamic application of God's two-testament word in the church's life and so in witness to the world. Covenant, in Israel and in the apostolic witness in Christ, reflects this same grammar of faith and has given rise to it.

The Anglican Communion could but hope that in its present life it was enabled by God to produce a covenantal framework which released the power of God for the sake of the world, by using the Communion as God has used Israel and the Son in covenantal love and accorded purpose. To this end, both the *covenant form* and the *according fulfillment* in Christ find their logic within the church's present life and witness, and this all the more so as the judgement of God on the Communion has been manifest for all the world to see. So it was with the covenant provision for Israel in Egypt and in Exile, in judgement before the world, and again for all world—Israel and the nations-- in the new covenantal work of the Cross. So it is as well for our present moment in God's providential unfolding in his covenant life with the Anglican Communion, at a time of judgement but also of new life and ongoing missionary accomplishment.

### ***Objections to Covenant – non-biblical transformation or improper application***

I believe I have heard two kinds of objections to the covenant, considered from the standpoint of the Bible. I leave aside then, for my purposes, groups and individuals who just do not like the idea in general terms.

1. The covenant conceived by the Windsor Report is *one undertaken by individuals and groups*. The Bible, by contrast, describes a *covenant initiated by God*. To this may be added the argument that when human covenants—not divine covenants—are mentioned in the Bible, they are of a different order and not to be emulated. God-initiated covenants are (at least potentially) good, other ones are bad.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> K. Grieb writes, "Like many people in the Anglican Communion, when I first read the Windsor Report with its recommendation of a covenant and its draft of a possible covenant in an appendix, initially I had

2. Covenants have stipulations, if not also penalties for breaching them. Limits are envisioned. Discipline—call it the judgment of God—is a critical factor and cannot be extracted from covenanting. The objection is that the Anglican Communion is not the kind of grouping which believes in limits, in Christ. This is

---

strong reservations about the idea of a covenant for the Anglican Communion. These reservations derived both from my legal education and from my training as a New Testament theologian. The very word "testament" is a partial synonym for "covenant" and New Testament scholars take pains to express clearly what is "older" and "newer" about God's covenant-making. Lawyers are often preoccupied with covenants in the form of contracts, breaches of contract, and various sorts of remedies.

The term "covenant" itself is fluid: it can range anywhere from an informal agreement to a solemn oath to a formal contract that is legally binding and enforceable. Covenants can be used for a variety of purposes: to invite or to impose, to include or exclude, to summarize a hard-won consensus or to set a limit beyond which the parties to the covenant may not go. The idea of a covenant is neutral: an agreement can be for good purposes or bad. One biblical example concerns the plot to kill Paul in Acts 23:12ff where a group of men bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. On the other hand, Paul and the Philippians are bound together in "koinonia," a business partnership or covenant for the proclamation of the gospel. He writes to them from prison precisely because they are bound to one another in covenant relationship.

In Scripture, the great majority of uses of the term "covenant" refers not to these agreements between people, but to the covenants that God has made: with humanity, with Israel as a whole, and with particular representatives of Israel: Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, etc. Biblical scholars have for a long time connected these to the treaties by which a powerful king or emperor bound a vassal-king's allegiance in return for certain benefits. These have a familiar form and there are many examples of the genre within the Old Testament to describe the relationship between God and Israel. Probably the first reference to a new covenant came out of the exilic period, e.g., Jeremiah 31:31-34, when God and Israel recommitted themselves to one another.

The references to covenant-making between people or covenants initiated by Israel are much less frequent and not always so positive. Israel was a small and powerless nation, often tempted to form covenant alliances with stronger neighbors instead of relying on God's protections. Isaiah 7 describes the king of Judah's fear that Israel and Syria would combine against him. Isaiah 28 portrays the rulers of Israel as saying "we have made a covenant agreement with Death and with Sheol we have an agreement" but God says: "your covenant with Death is annulled; your agreement with Sheol will not stand." Behold I am laying in Zion a foundation stone...." God has made alternative arrangements for Israel's salvation. So a covenant that is not of God, a covenant with powers opposed to God, or a covenant constructed for an ungodly purpose, will not finally stand. Again, to summarize: a covenant can be good or bad. The idea of a covenant by itself, is neutral. Everything depends on its purpose" ("Interpreting the Proposed Anglican Covenant Through the Communique," an Episcopal News Service posting, 19 March 2007). As an idea, a covenant is "neutral" – but biblical covenants are not ideas; they are personal, relational charters and the purpose of the covenant is inextricable in its provision. Covenant making in the Bible can of course be related to the wider Ancient Near Eastern context, precisely because covenants are not ideas and are not neutral: but as with the entirety of scripture, a general practice in the history-of-religion is transformed when it becomes a practice utilized by God for a providentially overseen purpose. One could read this preface by Grieb and conclude that the covenanting in scripture is on the same order as animal husbandry in Israel, possibly good, sometimes not so good; something that God can take an interest in (see the conclusion to Jonah) or something that exists in the general environment and so requires an external grid for evaluation ("what is the purpose of said covenant?"). This is to understate the significance of covenanting and its central and interlocking role across Old and New Testaments – especially in the New Testament (where the examples given are a human business contract or a murder scheme). This prejudices the discussion from the outset.

of course to beg the question. Is it not in the nature of the case that limits are crucial *whenever God makes solemn promises with real people*? At issue then, are not limits, which are inevitable, but what sort of limits and what logic and warrant scripture might be agreed to deliver for these.

To summarise objections, then: from the standpoint of the Bible, covenant is an inappropriate churchly commandeering of a biblical concept, and where there may be a fit, it is wrong.

I will address these objections but prefer to do so in the context of positive observations about the character of biblical covenants. Here my concern is with the larger picture of covenant in the Old and New Testaments. I will also use the form of the Deuteronomic covenant as a lens on what it might mean to reflect theologically on covenanting in the Anglican Communion at this moment in time.

### ***Covenant Dynamic: Mission and Reconciliation***

The term covenant and the contexts in which it appears are dynamic in character.<sup>9</sup> There is not a single idea of covenant in the OT, and the word itself cannot be reduced to a single conception or etymological (root) meaning. The Bible takes up a widely attested Ancient Near Eastern reality and transforms it in accordance with the purposes of the God of Israel with his people and through them, with the created order and all nations. The covenants with Noah and Abraham are in the form of a pledge. The Deuteronomic covenant has a very full form (divine address, historical preamble, pledge, stipulations, blessings and curses, solemnisation). In this form it resembles Ancient Near Eastern contracts and more general covenants of grant (or charter) we can observe in antiquity. In the final form of Deuteronomy, however, such a covenant reckons with its own abrogation (see Deuteronomy 30:1-10).<sup>10</sup> In that sense Deuteronomy envisions a covenant that participates in all three ‘uses’ of the law, including the exposing of basic human failure and the overriding grace of God, on the other side of judgment (the so-called ‘theological use’ of the law). The desisting and forbearing God is the promising and law giving God, foreseeing failure and dealing with it in the very nature of his character, and so demonstrating that character as ‘slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.’

The idea of a ‘new covenant’ is resident in the old in the nature of the case, due to this inherently dynamic character and because so stated expressly in Jeremiah (31:31-34), and intimated in Ezekiel (36:22—37:28) and elsewhere (Deut. 30:1-10). The covenant with creation is an extrapolation, where the initiative of God in creating and sustaining the creation is taken to be the divine initiative in foundational terms. So while Genesis 1 does not use the term *berit*, other parts of the Bible can see creation in terms of covenant (Gen. 9:1-17; Isa. 24:5; Isa. 54:9-10). Finally, Isaiah can creatively use the term covenant to

---

<sup>9</sup> A thorough if somewhat ‘history-of-religion’ account of this can be found in G. Mendenhall, G. Herion, “Covenant,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1992) I.1179-1202.

<sup>10</sup> D. Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death and Moses: A Theological Reading* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

speak of the role of Israel as earthly agent in accomplishing the reconciling work of God with the nations. He speaks in Isaiah of a *berit 'am* (42:6; see also 49:6).

In sum, there is no single covenant but a pattern of covenanting, with an interlocking and cooperating character, meant to move as dynamically as possible. The inner nerve of covenanting is *at once missional and reconciliatory*. This is what becomes clear when covenants are considered as a whole, in the comprehensive sense, and not as discrete history-of-religions episodes. However one understands the kind of new covenant envisioned in the Old Testament (see Jer 31:31ff), it is clear that something larger and final is envisioned beyond the parameters set for Israel's life with God. From within an elected and internal covenant, there is to be a wider covenant of adoption, fulfilling the promises made to Abraham and Noah and creation itself. This is the missional nerve of covenant.

The reconciliatory aspect is there in Deuteronomy itself, and in Jeremiah's new covenant it takes the form of an address to the very heart and will, in the form of a promise of a new, capacitated kind of obedience. In Christ, that capacity is gifted to the church by the Holy Spirit, and the obedience of Christ becomes the charter for freedom, whereby the church loves to do what it is commanded. In John's Gospel, this is accompanied by a clear sense that not to do what is commanded is not to love God or enjoy the fellowship of charity it is the Son's will to offer and to guarantee (John 14:15-31).

### ***The 'Covenant Form' and Modern Theological Appropriation***

One particular place where the dynamic character of covenanting is revealed is in *the historical preamble*, which typically grounds and orientates the covenant. This changes because God addresses Noah and Moses and David and Jeremiah in different circumstances. I brought you out of Egypt, therefore.... I pledge to walk with you in promise, therefore.... I will make you a house, therefore... I will bring you out of exile, therefore.... I call you friends and will die for you to make good what my Father has promised, do this therefore in remembrance of me. Only an odd Biblicism would ask that the church conform exactly to the form of a covenant which is itself inherently dynamic, and capable of extension precisely in circumstances which are not identical. The appeal to the Rule of Faith is precisely an appeal to the Bible in the comprehensive way it reflects on covenant in the dual legacy of Prophet and Apostle, and then seeking to understand and apply the logic of covenanting in the context of the church's lived life.

The historical preamble is always tied up with *self declaration*: 'I am the LORD.' For the God of Israel is not 'being' but is as he shows himself to be, as he makes good on promises declared from beforehand.<sup>11</sup> The promising God who covenanted with Noah and Abraham is the fulfilling 'I am who I said I would be' of Moses and the covenant people delivered by his hand. For the apostolic circle, the 'before Abraham, I am' Jesus Christ is the one who in his acts of mercy and teaching and living and dying and being

---

<sup>11</sup> C. Seitz, "Our Help is in the Name of the LORD, the Maker of Heaven and Earth," *Figured Out*, 177-190;

C. Gieschen, "The Divine Name in Ante-Nicene Christology," *Vigiliae Christianae* 57 (2003) 115-58.

raised on the third day, makes good on promises to worried apostles, which are themselves fulfillments of promises made to creation and patriarchs and prophets. The God who raises Jesus sends forth the Holy Spirit to teach and capacitate obedience to the Lord, who made himself known in historical time to the circle of his Easter apostles, but limited his revelation in just that form, yet who in the church continues to manifest himself via the witness of apostles prophets, by the teaching presence of the Holy Spirit. As is often stated, there are no crude forms of the revelation of God that presuppose nothing and come, as it were, 'out of the blue.'<sup>12</sup> The mystery of the revelation of God in scripture is that he has been known in particular ways, but chooses to promise more, say more, and fulfill more, rather than that we are to imagine a time when he was not known at all and then suddenly appeared (on this mystery, see Genesis 4:26). The self-designations of covenants build upon what is known and enlarge, as God moves missionally outward: 'then you will know that I am the LORD when I...'. The already known God promises to be known more all the same -- but only under the terms of his own disposing and as often in judgment (see the divine self-designations in Ezekiel) as in promise and gift.

And so we come to the notion of incompatibility (objection 1 above). It is clear that the covenants within the scriptures are not identical with one another, but belong to a dynamic which allows the providential activity of the triune God to unfold in accordance with his promises and his will to fulfill. So, too, insofar as the church is the location of the Holy Spirit's ongoing work, we should not expect a covenant that imitated a prior moment of revelation and care, but one which participated in the reconciliatory and missional inner nerve of these prior covenants, now as God cares for his Body in our own day.

Strictly speaking, the form of our own covenant life with God today, as it is being considered, is also not at our initiative, but is in response to the prior activity and initiative of the God who created, called and elected a people, and within his life with them both promised and then made good on the promise of a new covenant, with elected and adopted both, made one in Christ Jesus. *In this 'one body' form, the covenant of God is the reconciliatory and missional work to which Anglican Christianity bears witness in time and space, as the outreach of the Body has been called into being by the God whose Gospel engendered such response and such growth, 'on a kingdom where the sun never sets.'* The 'I am the Lord your God' self-declaration is therefore grounded and declared in the historical facts of missional expansion and reconciliatory charity, which are the emblems, God being kind, of Anglican Christianity in now 38 provinces.

*Promises/Pledge.* As has been mentioned, covenants in Christian Scripture may be made without reference to specific stipulations. They may lack the full form of Deuteronomy or

---

<sup>12</sup> See my discussion in "The Ten Commandments: Positive and Natural Law and the Covenants Old and New," in *"I am the LORD your God." Christian Reflections on the Ten Commandments* (C. Braaten and C. Seitz, eds.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 18-38; J. Barr concedes this issue in a book otherwise supportive of 'natural law', *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993) 147-8. He had made something of the same point earlier in *Old and New in Revelation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

ANE analogues. The gift of the Anglican Communion is a given, it precedes us in time, and it exists only at God's initiative, as a response in communal form to the gracious gift of new life in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the fulfillment of the promise to Noah, Abraham, David, the prophets and apostles. It is not under our power of accomplishing *ab initio*, though it is always under our influence to hinder or hurt. It has its own promissory character, in that we receive it as a gift, and find our own sacramental life in Christ within its confines and its life of worship, mission and praise. The Anglican Communion is a gift, already received, and a promise, made by the Triune God, on behalf of his reconciling work for all creation.

*Stipulations.* Covenants also have stipulations in versions of their form. The Decalogue is a classic example. Stipulations represent that aspect of God's character the Bible calls 'jealousy', which is why stipulations are never that in the strict sense, but are grounded, as in the Decalogue, to concerns for clarity about the character of God.<sup>13</sup> This I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt is the One with whom we have to do in Jesus Christ, and by virtue of that relationship, we are able to understand ourselves before the God of Israel at Sinai, alongside his elected children (we are the sojourners in the midst, as Leviticus puts it and as Acts 15 correlates it).<sup>14</sup> Stipulations are always preceded by acts of grace and mercy, both for Israel and for those of us brought near in Jesus Christ. So it is that the love of Jesus Christ ties us into the commands of Jesus Christ. The 'do this in remembrance of me' is just such a command, and the obedience capacitated by the Holy Spirit makes doing what Christ commands, and what God has commanded in prior covenants, our joy as well as our holy obligation.

So it is that stipulations envisioned in a Communion Covenant are responses to a gift and flow from, and are to be coordinated with, those stipulations that provide the gracious inner nerve—the 'Thou shalt not' which in Christ becomes the 'It is my joy not to do'—of prior covenants.<sup>15</sup> They do not 'update' or 'replace' these stipulations, but live alongside them, now partaking of their own character, given the providential working of God in and with the missional and reconciling work of the Anglican Communion.

The Windsor Report and related documents make clear that stipulations, in Christ, have chiefly—given our providential location—to do with conciliarity and subsidiarity. They are not then new lists of stipulations – these exist already in the covenants of prophets and apostles. The church does not arrogate to itself authority to 'improve' and replace. All such episodes of adaptation and transformation within scripture itself make clear the highest degree of continuity and providential consistency, this grounded in the single will and life of the Triune God, in Israel and in Christ. In the life of the church stipulations, rather, are solemn pledges to remain in the fellowship, as this is expressed at its widest points, in the missional and reconciliatory work of the Communion in 38 provinces, under the authority of Holy Scripture. Stipulations are then, take the form then, in an

---

<sup>13</sup> See the apt treatment of 'jealousy' in R. Jenson, *Systematic Theology* (Volume 1; New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 46-47.

<sup>14</sup> R. Bauckham, "James and the Jerusalem Church," *The Book of Acts in its Palestinian Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1985) 415-80.

<sup>15</sup> See R. Huetter's elegant discussion in "I am the LORD your God," 189-205.

Anglican Covenant, of forbearance in Christ one for another, in mutual submission to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This submission is enjoined precisely because the gift of Communion has only happened because of prior obedience to the authority of ‘the prophets and apostles’ and a willingness to receive in joy, in Christ, the commands that ground and orientate our life in God, in Israel in promise, law and figure, and in the Church.

*Blessings and Curses and Solemn Pledging.* To underscore the solemn character of what is being received and pledged, under God, covenants very frequently have a clear sacramental provision or ritual. This serves as a material marker of what is being entered into. But the blessings and curses in the case of Deuteronomy do not exist primarily as a static ‘Sword of Damacles,’ or a kind of eternal Speed Camera posted before hash marks on the M1. In the final form of Deuteronomy, two strict alternatives (blessing for obedience, curse for disobedience) become serial episodes as well (Deut. 30:1-10; see also 1 Kgs 8:22-53). Israel, God foresees, will disobey, will go into Exile, will bring upon themselves the curses which served as a permanent solemn warning on the plains of Moab for that and for all generations to follow. Disobedience is expected, and indeed foreseen, and yet without any lessening of the seriousness of the solemn, sacramental warning when first it was most urgently issued. God is the LORD, the LORD compassionate and merciful, whether at the plains of Moab, or when issuing commandments at Sinai which are at the very same moment being flagrantly disregarded in the celebrations led by the priest Aaron at the foot of the mountain; or whether broken by fleeing and denying apostles as Jesus makes his way up Calvary. This means, in the case of our own Anglican covenanting, stipulations must be rightly understood: as statements of our forbearance in Christ, which are always open to both our disregard and God’s will to restore. We are only ever broken on the holy grace of God, both when he enters into gracious life with us, and also when we err and stray, and he seeks us out and puts his garments of joy and eternal life on our soiled wills and hearts, and welcomes us back into His fellowship, which was only and always ever a gift. So for Israel (see Deuteronomy) so also for His Body the church.

### ***Conclusions***

In sum, covenants are deeply personal, relational, missional, reconciliatory expressions of the will of the One God to save, to bring into fellowship, and to oblige. This ‘obliging’ is crucial, not because God delights in commands, but because commands are given in order for grateful response to be possible. But at the very same time, commands never replace the Holy and Living God, who in his character is the desisting and forbearing Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If the gracious ‘obliging’ is cast aside, God has made provision for renewal and reconciliation, as part of the very act of covenanting in the first place.

It is not the task of those who undertake to compose a covenant, and those who obligate themselves, in Christ, to do what it asks, to imitate *a single episode* or *individual form* from within scripture’s panoramic account. This would be an odd kind of Biblicism, and may explain in part why the New Testament can refer reflexively to a new covenant with

all high seriousness, without the necessity of the provision of inventive new forms. The New Covenant belongs *within* the logic of the covenants of God with Israel and the creation made in the Scriptures of Israel: it refers and defers to this larger providential order, builds upon it and extends it. The same holds true for the Anglican Communion in our day. The dynamic and personal character of covenanting is extended, in continuity with God's work with Prophet and Apostle, and now with the Church in Jesus Christ.

In the case of Anglicanism, it is the divine initiative in spreading the Gospel throughout the world to which we make response. We have never truly faced this moment with the kind of seriousness now required—due precisely to the success of missional expansion and the rapid character of communication and personal communion—and so it is not surprising that our time calls for a recognition, solemn and joyful, of God's work, and of our concern to acknowledge and live within its gracious provision. That is why an Anglican Covenant is proposed by the Windsor Report and why we should undertake its relational, missional and reconciliatory calling in this present season.

This essay began with concern for those who reject an Anglican covenant as either unbiblical or impossible of proper extension on scripture's terms of provision. But equally there is now a danger that the covenant way will be rejected as too cumbersome or too ill-suited to our season of global forbearance and discipline. In conclusion then key aspects of the covenant logic in scripture can be summarized in order to apply this logic to the argument against an Anglican covenant posed by those who see it as ill-suited to the demands of our present season.

Covenants exist in mutual relationship: they extend, confirm, build-upon and interpenetrate one another. This extending and confirming happens from Old to New. The new covenant is an Old Testament conception: it is indigenous in the Old's logic. The New Covenant confirms and extends the older covenants without replacing them, but according with them, and elaborating them in the context of finality and fulfillment. Covenants in the Old Testament do not have 'sell-by' dates, but provision for their maintenance conforms to their original and abiding logic. The covenant or charter with David takes up older promises and older covenants and applies them in the context of statehood: an address to the failures of judging, itself an address to disobedience in the days of Joshua.

This covenant with David and his house does not assure success. It displays an intention of God for Israel and the wider world which is indeed brought into relief by serial and well-nigh complete failure on the part of Israel's individual kings. Only Hezekiah and Josiah, of all the kings of Judah, merit unqualified praise. Hopes for a new David amount not to a rejection of the covenant and a starting over with a new conception, but fulfillment of what God had intended and stood by.

It was reckoned an alternative to this covenant to consolidate one portion of God's people and to operate independently of its larger claims. The covenant with David required a forbearance and an attachment to God's selection of his house and lineage thought unjust, distant, inconvenient, or overly ambitious, by the northern kingdom. This did not mean

that good kings did not arise or that God did not show care and patience. But the best king of this northern coalition was in the nature of the case inferior to the worst king operating within the logic of the Davidic covenant, even if in abject disobedience. Promises to restore the Davidic covenant, after the Fall of the Northern Kingdom, and then the Fall of Judah, never forget the terms of the division and the pledge of its restoration (Ezek. 37:15-28).

Those who today reject the idea of an Anglican Covenant may rightly see that a more compact, just, or convenient model might be conceived. The restriction to a smaller group and a more efficient means of disciplining and self-governing may appear in the nature of the case more likely of success. Good Bishops and godly leaders may well animate such a conception and such a hope. But it is precisely the wider catholic claims of Anglicanism, unwieldy and ambitious though they are, that would be sacrificed if the Covenant did not seek to be the most comprehensive means of scriptural life and mission the Anglican Communion could be, and has been. As with the Davidic covenant and the individual kings it raised up and preserved, the possibility of falling short and the prospect of seasons of judgment cannot be ruled out and indeed can be expected. But only the catholic and evangelical claims of the Gospel will be highlighted if it is also by, even by, judgment that God's most comprehensive vision for His Body is still held out to the world. So it was with the covenant with David, fulfilled by God at the Cross of David's and His Son, and so it will be for those who in His name seek to live within a Gospel covenant in this season facing the Anglican Communion. Rather than, 'to your tents, O Israel' may we hear from as wide as the Gospel has gone forth in our own Anglican ranks, a willingness to work for and live within an Anglican Covenant in our day, consistent with, building upon, the covenants of Old and New Testaments. In so doing, the family of Anglicanism will show the authority it gives to the witness of Prophet and Apostle. By obedience to the Rule of Faith, it might also be given that share of God's richest blessing, on behalf of the world he has made, appropriate to the covenant life of Israel and Jesus Christ and the Apostles of his calling and sending forth.