



A Scripture-formed Communion? Possibilities and Prospects after Lambeth, ACC, and General Convention

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ABSTRACT

The question of the authority, use and relevance of Scripture in today's Anglican Communion needs to be addressed more thoroughly. All authority is God's authority, and the question of Scripture's authority needs to be reframed in that light: God is not merely providing information and instruction, but taking forward his Kingdom-project, and Scripture is not merely a witness to that but also a necessary agent, equipping God's people for their tasks. Various questions then emerge in a new light: we need an integrated, layered, and nuanced vision of the whole Scripture, foregrounding the gospel challenge of new creation and recognizing the inadequacy of some standard slogans such as Jesus' supposed slackening of the law. In particular, the biblical basis of 'covenant' needs further exploration, and the whole communion should embrace a much richer practice of Scripture reading and study to face the challenges of tomorrow's world.

KEYWORDS: Anglican Communion, authority, ethics, Jesus' teaching, Kingdom of God, Lambeth Conference, Scripture

Introduction

The Lambeth Conference reminded us all twelve months ago – as if we needed it! – just how diverse the Anglican Communion is. Yet it also reminded almost all of us why it matters, and why it matters that it is indeed a communion, not a loose federation. It matters because of our mission: we are not a loose agglomeration of people engaged in quite different tasks, but a single body committed to working for

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God's Kingdom and making it a reality in and through the rescued and transformed lives of communities and individuals. It matters because of those members who are in sorrow or pain and need help and support: the Melanesian martyrs were a clear and poignant sign of that. It matters because of our ecumenical commitment: we want to work more closely with our colleagues in other churches and it is important that we can do so as one body. And it matters, not least, because it reflects our commitment at quite a deep level to the scriptural and indeed dominical mandate to unity. 'May they all be one': Jesus' great prayer is echoed by the passionate and theologically grounded appeals for unity in Paul's letters, not least the regular awareness that for the church to be disunited is to hand some kind of victory to the principalities and powers. They, after all, think they run the world, and a church united across traditional barriers (race, class, gender) is the key sign that they do not, and that Jesus does instead.

But this is to run ahead of myself. The Lambeth Conference also reminded us quite forcibly both that we all acknowledge the central role of Scripture within our common life and that we are very far from agreed as to what that role is or how it should be worked on and worked out. Our implicit and, sometimes, explicit divisions on all sorts of matters could in principle be mapped on to a chart of beliefs about and attitudes towards Scripture. As a writer in the *Church Times* put it recently, no doubt with tongue in cheek: in answering the question 'Why do you value the Bible?', the conservative evangelical will say 'because it uniquely proclaims all that is necessary for personal salvation', the Anglo-Catholic will say 'because in it we find God's blueprint for his Church', and the liberal will say 'well, actually, it contains some really super poetry'. Some of us want to say something like all three of those, but want to say a lot more as well, and this article is written in the hope of getting beyond that sterile stand-off between traditional positions.

What I have to say is dependent on the position on 'Scripture and the Authority of God' that I have outlined in the book of that title.² I shall not repeat the argument of that book, but merely summarize it.

First, the phrase 'authority of Scripture' only makes sense when we see it as a shorthand way of saying 'God's authority exercised through Scripture'. All authority is God's, and in Mt. 28, the risen Jesus declares that it has been given to him. To speak of Scripture's authority must be a way of recognizing that, not of replacing it.

2. N.T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God* (London: SPCK, 2005); published in USA as *The Last Word* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005).

Second, Scripture as it stands does not appear to conform to normal models of 'authority'. It does not (that is) consist of lists of commands or true doctrines, though plenty of both are found within it. Rather, it consists, in its canonical shaping, of a long, sprawling, complex but ultimately coherent narrative about the creator and the creation, the people of Israel, and particularly Jesus Christ and his first followers. The question then ought to be: How can a narrative be 'authoritative', and in particular, how can *this* narrative fulfil that function? What sense does that make?

Third, if the authority is ultimately God's, and if this supposedly authoritative document through which God's authority is somehow exercised is essentially a narrative, that narrative is about God's mission to and in his creation, about what Jesus called 'God's Kingdom', his rescuing, liberating sovereignty, reclaiming his world from the powers of evil and death through the life and achievement of Jesus Christ. This helps to frame the question: What is this authority *for*? Until we can answer that accurately we may well be looking for, or (worse) imagining that we have found, an answer to the wrong question. God is establishing his Kingdom in the world through Jesus Christ, and supremely through his death and resurrection. How does 'biblical authority' not only help us to recognize that but also help us to be the people through whom that purpose can be set forward?

These reflections can and should reframe the way we approach the question of biblical authority and, not least, the way we reflect on how God himself, working through the Bible itself, can shape and form the Communion we share as Christian people. In our case this means the Anglican Communion; but, as many Anglicans have believed over many years, the Anglican Communion can be seen as a focal point of, and perhaps catalyst for, God's larger concern for all those who name the name of Christ. Unless we can sort out something of a shared approach to Scripture, that vocation is going to disappear like a morning cloud.

From Prooftexts to Paradigms

For a start, it is vital that we teach and encourage one another, as soon as possible, to move beyond a particularly sterile stand-off that has bedevilled (I use the word advisedly) attempts to discuss and debate many key issues. Trapped in the worldview of modernist rationalism, far too often the debate has taken the form of 'You don't believe in the Bible, because there's a verse in the Bible which says X, and you're ignoring it', and 'You're just a literalist, a fundamentalist, snatching verses out of context and failing to realize that the same book which

says “men shouldn’t have sex with men” also says “don’t eat shell-fish”’. I suspect that most other thinking Anglicans (if I can recapture that phrase from certain interest groups that use ‘thinking’ to mean ‘agreeing with me’) are equally sick of that false either/or. But how do we get beyond it?

The fairly obvious clue, which is already well known as a principle of hermeneutics but not often enough applied, is that we should constantly remind ourselves that texts mean what they mean in contexts, and that the overall context of the Bible is a large story with many (but not infinite) dimensions. In the Christian Bible, this story reaches its climax with the events concerning Jesus of Nazareth, and, having been concentrated on that point, then fans out again into the wider world and the open-ended narrative of ongoing history.

This rather obvious point needs cashing out for its force to be felt. The Bible as a whole offers a paradigm, a framework, an overarching context in which the text itself is designed to function, through the mercy and providence of the God of creation and covenant, as a crucial means of guiding God’s people to be the people *through whom new creation will come about*. The Bible is there, not simply to impart true information about what God is up to (through, as it might be, some quite other means), but to be part of the action, part of the means by which God does what God intends to do. This (to put it mildly) is a more dynamic concept of ‘authority’ than is sometimes imagined, and also more complex. It wasn’t just that Jesus knew his Bible rather well and discerned in several passages clues about what he had to do, say, and suffer. It isn’t just that Christians today need to read the Bible again and again to be sure that they are believing, or doing, everything it says. It is, rather, that Jesus (like his Jewish contemporaries) read his Bible as the single great narrative (full of extra pathways, poems, and proverbs, of course, but still a single great narrative) of how the creator God had called out a people through whom he would redeem the world. The difference was that he (unlike most of his Jewish contemporaries) understood this story as funnelling down onto a single point, or rather a single person; and that (unlike all his Jewish contemporaries including his own disciples) he believed that that person, that is, himself, would fulfil this vocation through his own representative suffering and death. And the Christian follow-on from that is that the Bible itself urges us to read it in full cognisance of the fact that we are ourselves actors in the ongoing drama, the story of the Holy Spirit which begins in Jn 14–16, Acts 2, and so on, but certainly does not end there, and that we must look back to the biblically narrated events of the world’s beginnings, of Israel, and of Jesus

himself as our constant reference-point. It simply will not do to pull proof-texts out of these complicated narratives – though sometimes a particular line can, no doubt, remind us of the larger whole. It is vital that we learn to read the whole story and to understand our own vocations in proper relation to it.

‘The authority of the Bible’, for Jesus himself, was not, then, about his knowing particular verses and passages and quoting them to establish debating points. Or rather, it was not principally about that, though he did of course refer back frequently, telling his interlocutors on more than one occasion that they were wrong because they didn’t know the scriptures. It was about his perception of the Bible as a great river, in which he found himself called to swim as it headed, at speed, straight for the massive waterfall in which it would be transformed forever and, in turn, would transform the world. The contrast between that vision and the text trading of ecclesial polemic could hardly be greater. When we look at the debates that go on in and around churches, and then lift our eyes to the relationship between Jesus and the Bible, the effect is like watching children splashing each other in a rock pool while, unnoticed, a tidal wave gathers strength and speed half a mile out to sea. It is time to harness the energy of that tidal wave instead of either running away from it or allowing it merely to knock us over.

The name of that tidal wave is of course ‘the Kingdom of God’, and part of the problem of debates about Scripture and its authority is that those who have emphasized Scripture have traditionally come from the Protestant and Evangelical wings of the church, where the message of God’s Kingdom has regularly been either muted or translated into something else. There is a great and sad irony about this, because many in those traditions, while claiming ‘Scripture’ as their starting and standing point, have, in fact, developed quite sophisticated techniques for avoiding not only its plain message but also its central message. Bluntly, language about ‘God’s Kingdom’ is not about ‘going to heaven when you die’, but about God’s Kingdom coming ‘on earth as in heaven’. Equally bluntly, avoiding this implication by saying that the Gospel is ‘spiritual, not political’ misses the whole point. Among the many confused results of the varied movements of western thought during the last few hundred years, it is this: that some of the crucial debates in the church present themselves, not as ‘those who believe the Bible’ versus ‘those who don’t believe the Bible’, but between what we might call ‘Epistles Christians’, who read the epistles to discover a scheme of personal salvation away from the world, and ‘Gospels Christians’, who read the gospels to find out what Jesus did in the world so they can do it too. Both sides distort, in ways too numerous and

complex even to name here. ‘Epistles Christians’ – whether radical Bultmannians or conservative Evangelicals, it makes no odds at this point – read the gospels simply as detached deeds and sayings that inform faith, not as coherent narratives about God’s inbreaking Kingdom. ‘Gospels Christians’ tend to have difficulty with Paul, and sometimes indeed with the whole question of why Jesus, with so much social action inside him trying to get out, was killed so soon and so apparently pointlessly. I caricature to make the point, but most will recognize the truth of what I’m saying. I suspect that most thoughtful Christians, if faced with this, will know that they want both, but may not easily find a framework for getting both, or for integrating them if they do. That is what we urgently need to recapture. Unless we can frame our discussions within these larger paradigms, we are likely once again to collapse into prooftexts.

Living in the New Creation

One of the great challenges of our day, obviously, lies in the area of (what are called) ‘Ethics’: how Christians are supposed to behave. It is actually quite remarkable that we have come to this point, though this is really another story. As Oliver O’Donovan has recently pointed out, ‘liberal’ Christianity used to challenge elements of the church’s dogma while assuming that everyone was agreed about ethics, and the current shift of attention vindicates those who said, some while back, that if you stopped believing in the church’s (and the Bible’s) doctrines it wouldn’t be that long before behaviour started to change as well.³

But a change of behaviour, in the other sense, is part of what the Gospel was always about. (This is obscured in circles where ‘justification by faith’ has become such a tightly stated shibboleth that any attempt to talk about lifestyle, behaviour, the church as a community that lives differently, and so on, has been frowned on as dangerously ‘works’-centred; and this ultra-Protestantism has then transmuted itself into a liberalism where, as in the Righter judgment of 1996, the ‘core doctrine’ of the church could be assumed not to include ‘ethics’.)⁴

3. Oliver O’Donovan, *A Conversation Waiting to Begin: The Churches and the Gay Controversy* (London: SCM, 2009).

4. In 1995 Walter C. Righter, the retired Episcopalian bishop of Iowa and at that time Assistant Bishop in the diocese of Newark, was charged by ten bishops under Church canons for ordaining a practising homosexual. On May 15, 1996 the church court, by a vote of seven to one, drew a distinction between ‘the Church’s Core Doctrine’ and ‘other Church teachings’ and, declaring that the sexual behaviour of clergy was not part of the former, dismissed the charges against Bishop Righter.

And here's the interesting point that, though many both in the church and out of it have assumed that Jesus and the early Christians lived and taught a 'liberalized' religion in which the old 'rules and regulations' of Judaism could be set aside, all the evidence shows a much more complicated and interesting pattern. Basically, Jesus himself, and his early followers such as Paul, believed *both* that with the arrival of God's Kingdom (whatever we mean by that) the new creation had begun, and human beings of all sorts had to be summoned to live as befits that new creation, *and* that with that new creation several of the rules designed for the period leading up to its inception could and should be set aside. Some things are intensified, others abandoned, but neither of these is arbitrary.

Tracking the transition into new creation is central and vital.⁵ Learning to read the Bible in terms of community formation and behaviour, and learning to discuss and argue out where the energy is to be focused and the boundaries are to be drawn — and is that not the task to which we are called in tomorrow's Anglican Communion? — is very largely a matter of learning to read the Bible with a layered and nuanced hermeneutic, refusing to take texts 'in the flat' irrespective of where they come from, and insisting instead that all be read through the lens of the new creation accomplished and launched in and through Jesus Christ, his Kingdom-work and his death and resurrection. 'If you are raised with the Messiah, seek the things that are above': Paul's injunction reframes the whole world, first of vocation (the point of 'Christian living' is above all that we live 'not for ourselves but for him who for our sakes died and was raised') and then of what we call 'ethics'. I suspect that Paul himself would not have made such a hard and fast distinction, but it will do for the present.

The truly fascinating thing is, to develop the previous point, that in the teaching of Jesus himself, and in the teaching of Paul and the other early Christians which follows from and develops the entire achievement of Jesus, we find what, from our point of view, looks like an odd combination of high-definition abrogation and high-octane intensification. Most western Christians these days assume *either* that 'Christ is the end of the Law', in the sense that the moral codes of the Old Testament can be set aside, *or* that 'the Bible says ...' so that everything in 'Scripture' can be read straightforwardly 'in the flat'.

5. For 'new creation' as a major theme in New Testament ethics, see Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

The reality is very different. First, serious abrogation: Jesus breaks the sabbath; he abolishes the food laws; he treats tax-collectors, prostitutes, and sinners as if they're part of the family. Ah, we say, there it is: the old moralisms have gone, the new inclusivity has arrived! But just as we draw this conclusion, we read some very different passages, where we find serious intensification: it isn't only murder that's forbidden, but anger; it isn't only adultery that's ruled out, but lust; it isn't only false swearing that's prohibited, but any swearing at all, since what is now required is truth-telling of a clear and absolute kind. Well, we say, at that point we have a new and seemingly fiercer legalism: I may be able to avoid killing my neighbour, but if I have to measure up to a standard where I never shout angrily at him or her I may find that beyond my reach. (Of course, it is always open to any gospel critic to say that one or other set of sayings was made up by the early church, but that merely cuts the knot; and, tellingly, we have the same odd combination in Paul, Hebrews and the rest.)

The problem is that we approach things with our own template of expectations, which simply doesn't match the way things appeared at the time. There is an interesting parallel to our dilemma in the puzzle the Rabbis faced in the second and third centuries AD, when trying to understand why Shammai was 'lenient' on some issues and Hillel 'strict', when normally they were the other way round. Shammai appeared 'lenient' on whether the disputed books 'made the hands clean'; no, he said, you're still 'clean' even if you touch them.⁶ Fancy that, said the later Rabbis: he allowed you to touch the scroll of Ecclesiastes and not to have to wash afterwards! But of course Shammai was in fact 'strict' on the question, not of keeping your hands clean, but of keeping doubtful books out of the Canon. The Rabbis were coming with their questions, and so misunderstanding the questions Shammai, and his rival Hillel, were actually debating.

In the same way, if we approach Jesus and Paul in terms of 'do they make life stricter or more lenient', we will miss the point. They are supremely interested in new creation, and in the question of how to generate and sustain communities in which individuals can live by, model, and produce more of that strange new commodity. Here, incidentally, the old chestnut of 'Jesus and Paul' comes into new focus. The underlying emphases of the Sermon on the Mount and similar

6. The point being that after handling the sacred books you had to wash your hands, as a sign of having been in contact with something holy. For the controversy, see N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 183f.

teaching include particular stress on the prohibition of violent anger on the one hand and sexual greed on the other. Lo and behold: in Paul, though the language may be different (Paul hardly ever saw a need to quote the actual words of Jesus) the content is identical.

This is why, to come closer to the key areas of contemporary discourse, Jesus' teaching on sexual morality was decisively clear, and marked a break, in a more stringent direction, with what had at least been permitted in the Old Testament. 'You have heard that it was said' ... that there were rules for how to divorce, how to protect the divorced wife so she did at least have a legal status. Jesus withdraws that permission (except for cases of immorality). What's more, by clear implication he ruled out the bigamy or polygamy which had been, tacitly at least, presupposed in the Old Testament (think of David or Solomon; think, even, of Abraham and Jacob). Jesus famously appeals to Gen. 1 and 2: one man, one woman, leaving parents and cleaving for life. It is very striking that among the Pastorals' qualifications for holding office in the church we find 'the husband of one wife'. I assume that, as in many parts of Africa today where polygamy is still rife, the church found itself laying down rules about the modelling of new creation among its office-holders. It is assumed that polygamists can become Christians (and will not be required to put away all but one of their wives).⁷ It is also assumed that they cannot hold public office. In some churches (but this, I think, varies from one locality to another) they are not allowed to receive communion — as indeed, until fairly recently, was the case in the Church of England with divorced and remarried persons. It is also, I think, assumed that though a polygamist can become a Christian, a Christian cannot become a polygamist.

Reading the Bible in terms of its climax in Jesus and his Kingdom-bringing work does not, then, mean reading it in a way that automatically abrogates the bits of the Old Testament we might want to leave behind — not only the prohibition on shellfish and multiple-material garments, but also sexual practices outside heterosexual monogamy. In fact, in the very passage (Mk 7; Mt. 15) where, as Mark insists, Jesus appears to be saying 'the food laws are no longer relevant now that the Kingdom of God is here', he also stresses that the real problem, to which the laws of 'clean and unclean' were a signpost, is the evil that bubbles up from the human heart, and that this evil includes 'sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness,

7. This was argued at Lambeth 1988 (resolution 26) on the grounds of deprivation: it was important that the multiple wives still be provided for.

treachery, debauchery, envy, slander, pride, stupidity'. As has been pointed out often enough, the words for 'sexual immorality', 'adultery', and 'debauchery' would between them conjure up, for Jesus' hearers, the full range of sexual behaviour prohibited in the Old Testament. The very same chapter that liberates Gentiles from the need to take on themselves the food taboos of the Jewish-specific law (and which opens up directly on the scene of the Syrophenician woman, which makes the same point from another angle) also insists that all, Jew and Gentile alike, have a deep problem with what comes out of the heart, and that non-marital sexual behaviour is part of that problem. The question isn't whether it is 'natural' or not. It's 'natural' that's the problem: 'these are things that come from inside, and they defile you'. What you need is a change of 'nature', a change of heart. That is what the inbreaking of God's Kingdom, as applied to individuals, is all about.

To read the Bible this way is, I submit, to read with the grain of the text. So many of our debates in recent church life have assumed that, embedded somewhere within the Bible, there are 'ethical precepts' of this or that sort, to be played off against one another, or to be relativized on a kind of sliding scale that applies to all of them alike ('now that we've relaxed the rules about divorce, shouldn't we do the same about homosexual behaviour?' — said as though the paradigm were (a) the Bible is an old book with lots of strange restrictive commands, (b) we all now know that we've got to move with the times and reinterpret the Bible for our own day, and (c) we've made a good start with doing that here and there and just need to be consistent!) But that simply isn't how scriptural ethics 'works'. Indeed, I suspect our whole category of 'ethics' isn't particularly 'scriptural' at all. It comes to us from the eighteenth-century split of facts and values. The Bible does, of course, contain a great deal of command and advice about 'how to behave' (or how not to behave). But all this is embedded within its larger narrative, which is about the creator's purposes for the world, and for his people as his agents carrying forward his purposes for the world. The commands and the advice must be read, demand to be read, can only properly be read, within that larger narrative. As I have argued elsewhere, the Bible itself demands to be read within a layered and nuanced hermeneutic. We cannot suppose that we can read *any* passage from the Old Testament and apply it 'directly' to ourselves; many parts come with flying colours through the climactic and decisive events of Jesus' Kingdom-bringing life, death, and resurrection, and indeed with their emphases enhanced, but many other parts are left happily behind, their task complete. That, indeed, is what much of

the letter to the Galatians is all about: the law had a temporary purpose, and when that purpose is accomplished those bits of the law can be wisely set aside, not as archaic or ill-informed restrictive practices that we've now outgrown, but as necessary earlier elements in a plan which has now reached a new stage at which those elements, no longer required, are rightly to be shelved. The amphibious craft switches off the propeller when it comes on shore, not because the propeller was a bad thing we shouldn't have used in the first place but because it was a good thing which has completed its water-related job.

All these reflections about new creation raise the question: how can we, within the church, teach one another to read Scripture with our eyes open to its deep and rich overall narrative, so that we can have the real debates that we should be having rather than the shallow ones we should have outgrown? Here, there is of course an urgent need for teaching and training, and for methods of Bible study, particularly in groups and among church leaders, which will bring out these elements clearly rather than focus on small details in which we will once again become bogged down in the sterile antithesis of 'the Bible says' versus 'that's out-of-date and disproved'. But before I offer some concluding reflections on how we might go about these tasks, I put forth some further proposals on being a covenant people, and indeed a new covenant people.

Covenant and New Covenant

The word 'covenant' has, of course, been given a whole new lease of life (or, some might think, kiss of death!) in recent Anglican discourse. At this point, I may perhaps be allowed to quote an early version of a document which the International Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission (IATDC) produced in the autumn of 2006 at its meeting in Limuru, Kenya. The document has been available on the Anglican Communion website,⁸ but since it didn't find its way into the IATDC's final Report (*Communion, Conflict and Hope*), and since I was responsible for at least the first draft, I think it would be helpful to quote it again. These biblical roots, expressed in something like this way, are the vital basis for any fruitful work down these lines.

(i) Everything about being Christian – worship, prayer, mission, fellowship, holiness, works of mercy, and justice – is rooted in the basic belief that the one God who made the world has acted in sovereign love

8. See <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/ecumenical/commissions/iatdc/docs/2006covenant.cfm>

to call out a people for himself, a people through whom he is already at work to anticipate his final purpose of reconciling all things to himself, things in heaven and things on earth (Eph. 1.10). This is what the creator God has done, climactically and decisively, in and through Jesus Christ, and is now implementing through the Holy Spirit. But this notion of God calling a people to be his own, a people through whom he will advance his ultimate purposes for the world, did not begin with Jesus. Jesus himself speaks of the time being fulfilled, and his message and ministry look back, as does the whole of earliest Christianity, to the purposes of God in, through and for his people Israel. The gospels tell the story of Jesus as the story of how God's purposes for Israel and the world reach their intended goal. Paul writes of the Gospel of Jesus being 'promised beforehand through God's prophets in the holy scriptures', and argues that what has been accomplished in Jesus Christ is what God always had in mind when he called Abraham (Gal. 3; Rom. 4). The earliest Christian writers, in their different ways, all bear witness to this belief: that those who follow Jesus, those who trust in his saving death and believe in his resurrection, are carrying forward the purposes for which God called Abraham and his family long before. And those purposes are not for God's people only: they are for the whole world. God calls a people so that through this people – or, better, through the unique work of Jesus Christ which is put into effect in and through this people in the power of the Spirit – the whole world may be reconciled to its creator.

(ii) A key term which emerges from much Jewish and Christian writings and which brings into sharp focus this whole understanding of God and God's purposes is *covenant*. The word has various uses in today's world (in relation, for instance, to financial matters, or to marriage), but its widespread biblical use goes way beyond such analogies. God established a covenant (*berit*) with Abraham (Gen. 15), and the writer(s) or at least redactor(s) of Genesis, in the way they tell that story, indicate clearly enough that God's call of Abraham, and the covenant established with him, was intended to be the means whereby God would address the problem of the human race and so of the entire created order. Gen. 12, 15, and the whole story address the problem set out in Gen. 3–11: the problem, that is, of human rebellion and death and the consequent apparent thwarting of the creator's plan for his human creatures and the whole of creation (Gen. 1, 2). And they claim – and this claim is echoed right across the Old Testament – that God has, in principle, solved that problem with the establishment of this covenant. Already the story offers itself as the story of God's uncaused, gracious, and generous *love*: God is under no

obligation to rescue humans, and the world, from their plight, but chooses to do so and takes the initiative to bring it about. As the story develops throughout the Old Testament this *covenant love* is referred to in various terms, for example, *hesed*.

(iii) The covenant with Abraham is then dramatically developed as God fulfils a promise made in Gen. 15, namely that he would rescue Abraham's family from slavery in Egypt. The story of the Exodus, with God bringing the Israelites through the Red Sea and pointing them towards their promised land, reaches a climax when they arrive at Mount Sinai and are given the Law (*Torah*) as the covenant charter, prefaced by God's declaration that Israel is to be his holy people, a nation of priests chosen out of and on behalf of the whole world (Exod. 19). The Law is meant to sustain Israel as the *covenant community*, the people who are bound to the creator God as in a solemn marriage vow (as in Hosea), and to one another as God's people, and through whom God's purposes are to be extended in the world. This vocation and intention is sorely tested as Israel repeatedly rebels against God, and the covenant is repeatedly renewed (Deut. 31; Josh. 9, 24; 2 Kgs 11.17; some have suggested that the Psalms provide evidence of frequent, perhaps annual, 'covenant renewal'). The prophets regularly call Israel back to the obligations of the covenant, obligations both to God and to one another. But Israel, the bearer of God's covenant promises, which ultimately envisage the whole world, proves unfaithful and is driven into exile — which the prophets interpret in terms of the covenant, understanding exile as covenantal punishment for covenantal disobedience. This is the more striking in that the covenant always envisaged Israel's being given the Promised Land, and the land being blessed when Israel is obedient to the covenant (see Deuteronomy, and e.g. Ps. 67).

(iv) It is at this time that there emerges the promise of a *new covenant*, through which (this is the point) God will at last do in and through Israel what the earlier covenants intended but did not bring about. Jer. 31 (similarly, Ezek. 36) speaks both of the forgiveness of the sins which had brought the earlier plans to ruin and also of a new knowledge of God which will come to characterize God's people. It is this ancient promise that the earliest Christians saw as having been fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus himself, indeed, spoke at the Last Supper of his forthcoming death as establishing the new, sin-forgiving covenant, and of the bread and the wine as somehow symbolizing that event, with that significance — and thus also effectively symbolizing the way in which his followers could find new life, together as a community and as individuals, through feeding on him and his saving death. From that moment on,

believing in Jesus, following him, seeking to live out his accomplishment through mission in God's world (bringing it to new fruitfulness and justice, as Israel's obedience was to bring blessing to the land), take place within what can with deep appropriateness be described as the *new covenant community*, constituted and reconstituted as such again and again not least precisely through sharing (*koinonia*, 'communion', or 'fellowship') at his table. According to Paul, all those who believe in Jesus belong at this table, no matter what their personal, moral, ethnic, or other background, and are thereby to be renewed in faith and holiness and energized for God's mission in the world. Baptism, the sign of entry into the renewed covenant, marks out not just individuals but the whole community of the baptized. To live as God's covenant people is thus the basic call of Christians, of the Church of God. To speak of being in covenant with God and with one another is nothing new for Christians. Indeed, not to do so – even by implication – is to call into question the classic model of Christian faith and life.

(I recognize that this early Christian understanding of the new covenant community raises sharply the question of the relationship between the emerging Christian family – most of whom, in the early period, were of course themselves Jewish – and the continuing community of those Jews who did not recognize Jesus as Messiah and Lord; and, today, the question of the relationship between Christians and Jews. This is not the place to discuss this complex issue, but it would be inappropriate not to mention it.)

(v) There are indications that the earliest Christians drew on existing Jewish models of what a 'new covenant community' might look like. In a way markedly similar to what we find in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the early Jerusalem Church held their possessions in common, and those in any individual family who were in need were the responsibility of all (hence the problems about widows in e.g. Acts 6 and 1 Timothy). Though a strict sharing of everything was not followed in the Pauline churches, we should not underplay the practical meaning of *agape*, 'love', in Paul, but rather give it its full meaning of mutual practical support (e.g. 1 Thess. 4.9-12). Paul chooses a special term (*koinonia*) that has both commercial and social implications to describe his covenant friendship with the Philippians. They were in 'partnership' together for the spreading of the Gospel and the mission of the church to the Gentiles in God's name. Although Paul and the Philippians are in different locations doing different tasks, they are nevertheless partners 'in Christ', sharing the risks as well as celebrating the successes of the Gospel. The point is that Christians are to think of themselves as *a single family*, in a world where 'family' means a good

deal more in terms of mutual obligations and expectations than in many parts of today's Western world at least. The community of the new covenant thus quickly came to see itself – and to be seen by the watching, puzzled and often hostile world – as marked out from all other social, cultural, and religious groupings, with the marking-out being primarily its devotion and loyalty to Jesus as Lord and its belief that the one God of Abraham had, by raising Jesus from the dead, fulfilled his ancient promises and launched the final stage of his world-transforming purpose. The new covenant community thus exists to set forward the mission of God in the power of the Spirit, and is therefore called to a shared, common life of holiness and reconciliation. The message of forgiveness and healing for the world must be enacted and embodied by the community that bears the message.

(vi) From the beginning, this vocation constituted a severe challenge for Jesus' followers, and there never was a time when they met it perfectly. The early church proceeded by a series of puzzles, mistakes, infidelities, quarrels, disputes, personality clashes, and a host of other unfortunate events as well as by faithful witness, martyrdom, generous love, notable holiness (remarked on with great surprise by some pagan observers, who didn't know such lifestyles were possible), and a genuine openness and obedience to God's often surprising and dangerous call. Since (in other words) being an early Christian seems to have been no less challenging and often perplexing than being a modern one, it is no surprise that the early Christians quickly developed a sense of how God guided his people and enabled them to discern the way forward both in new mission initiatives and in matters of dispute within their common life. Central to it all was the sense of the presence of the risen Jesus Christ in their midst ('where two or three are gathered in his name', as Jesus himself puts it in Mt. 18), so that the covenant community is not a mere human institution following an agenda but a fellowship of disciples together seeking to know, listen to, worship, love, and serve their Lord. In particular, the community we see in Acts, the Epistles, and the writings of the second century was constantly concerned to invoke, celebrate and be deeply sensitive to the leading and guiding of the Holy Spirit. Repeatedly, this involved fresh searchings of Scripture (for the earliest Christians, the Old Testament; for the next generation, the apostolic traditions as well) and serious prayer and fasting, waiting for a common mind to emerge.

(vii) In and through it all the *unity* of the Church – unity both within local churches and between different churches – emerges as a vital strand, not least as persecution mounts and the Church finds itself under dire threat. Indeed, the *koinonia* of the new covenant

community, as the people who give allegiance to Jesus as 'Lord' in a world where there were many 'Lords', notably the Roman emperor, meant that from the beginning there was a necessary (and dangerous) political implication to the founding and maintaining of a trans-ethnic and trans-national covenant community. All kinds of attempts were made to fracture this unity, and many early writers devote attention to maintaining it, to guard it, and to re-establish it when broken. It is at that point (for instance) that Paul works out his position about 'things indifferent' (those aspects of common life about which the community should be able to tolerate different practices), as well as his position about those things (e.g. incest) that the community should not tolerate at any price (1 Cor. 5, 8). The vital unity of the covenant community needs the careful and prayerful use of quite sophisticated tools of discernment, tools that were already developed in the earliest church and are needed still.

(viii) It is this complex yet essentially simple vision of the people of God, which is invoked when the Church today thinks of itself as a 'covenant community'. That is not to say that all uses of the word 'covenant' in today's discussions necessarily imply that the 'covenants' we enter into (for instance, those between different Christian denominations) are somehow the *same* as the essential covenant between God and the people who, beginning with Abraham and renewed in Jesus Christ, are called to belong to him and to take forward his mission in the world. But the use of the word in today's church carries, and honours, the memory of the biblical covenant(s). It seeks to invoke and be faithful to the themes we have just explored: the sovereign call of God to belong to him and to work in the power of his Spirit for his purposes in the world, and the consequent call to the unity, reconciliation, and holiness which serve that mission.

(ix) There is no sense, of course, that introducing the notion of 'covenant' into talk of mutual relationships between Christians implies the establishment of a *further* 'new covenant' over and above *the* 'new covenant' inaugurated by Jesus Christ. Rather, all use of covenantal language in relation to the Church today must be seen as a proposal for specific kind of recommitment within that same covenant, in particular situations and in relation to particular communities. And that, in turn, reminds us that, once we start talking of being in covenant with one another, we are immediately reminded of our participation in the covenant which God has made with us in Jesus Christ. The horizontal relationship with one another is dependent, theologically and practically, on the vertical relationship with the creating, loving, and reconciling God we know in Jesus and by the Spirit.

(x) The notion of 'covenant' has not been prominent to date within Anglican traditions of polity and organization ('covenantal' language has, of course, been familiar from teachings on, for instance, baptism and marriage). But the picture of the Church developed by the sixteenth-century Reformers, by great theoreticians like Hooker (who explored the notion of 'contract'), and by many subsequent writers, sets out models of church life for which 'covenant', with the biblical overtones explored briefly above, may serve as a convenient, accurate, and evocative shorthand. Recent discussions of Anglican identity, addressing the uncertainty as to how Anglicans are bound together around the world, have explored the notion of 'bonds of affection', the powerful though elusive ties that hold us together in friendship and fellowship. This kind of *relational* bonding, I believe, remains central to any appropriate understanding of our shared communion.

(xi) It is out of that relational understanding of worldwide Anglicanism that the proposal for a 'covenant' has now grown, and it is in that sense that the proposal is to be understood. The IATDC, the Windsor Report, the Primates, and now the Lambeth Conference and the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC), have all endorsed the proposal to work towards a more explicit 'Anglican Covenant', not in order to bind us to new, strange, and unhelpful obligations, but rather to set us free both from disputes which become damaging and dishonouring and from the distraction which comes about when, lacking an agreed method, we flail around in awkward attempts to resolve them. The ACC has now endorsed three of the four sections of the draft Covenant, and the fourth is in its final stages of revision at the time of writing, with the strong steer from the Archbishop of Canterbury that any final revisions of this section must clarify rather than weaken it.

Working towards, and then hopefully within, a 'covenant' does not introduce an alien notion into an Anglicanism which has never thought like this before. Rather, it seeks to draw from the deep scriptural roots in which Anglicanism has always rejoiced, and from the more recent awareness of 'bonds of affection', a more explicit awareness of those covenantal beliefs and practices which resonate deeply with many aspects of Anglican tradition and which urgently need to be refreshed and clarified if the Church is to serve God's mission in coming generations. To the suggestion that such a new move appears to be restrictive or cumbersome, there is an easy reply. When the ground is soft and easy, we can walk on it with light or flimsy shoes. When it gets stony, muddy, or steep we put on walking boots, not because we don't want to be free to walk but because we do.

That concludes the text I originally wrote for the IATDC. It seems to me still extremely relevant to our current concerns. Indeed, since both Lambeth and the ACC have now sent the first three sections of the Covenant forward to Provinces for consideration, and since Section Four will be in final form quite soon, these biblical and theological concerns remain central.

Conclusion: Urgent Questions, Ongoing Practice

From all that I have said (which is but a small part of all that could have been said) it will be clear that I believe the Bible to be far more significant, as the God-given generating agent of healthy church life, than we have normally supposed. The classic Reformation formulae about the Bible containing ‘everything that is to be believed in order to be saved’ was constructed at a time when the Reformers were guarding against the introduction of new dogmas to be believed on pain of death in this world and/or damnation in the next: the relevant clauses in their formulae, and in the Ordinal, were about *restricting* what ‘had to be believed’ to Scripture alone, not about insisting, to people who might believe considerably less, that they had to embrace the *whole* Scripture. ‘You *only* have to believe the Bible’, they said, ‘not all those other things as well!’ Our pressing need is in the other direction: ‘You *must* take the whole Bible seriously’, we should insist, ‘not pick and choose the bits you like!’ And, as I have suggested briefly, ‘taking the whole Bible seriously’ doesn’t mean ‘treating Leviticus and John’s Gospel in exactly the same way’; rather, taking it seriously means taking it seriously *as what it is*, as the ongoing, layered, and nuanced narrative of creation and covenant, climaxing in Jesus and generating the life of the ‘new covenant’ people.

Part of the difficulty of applying all this to the question of where the Anglican Communion is at this moment, and where it ought now to be going, is that living with Scripture in the way I have indicated is not something you can straightforwardly pick up, translate into a formula, and drop into a theological or political discussion to raise a key question or settle a vital point. Yes, there are some things on which you can approximate to that, though the lines are easily blurred in today’s confused moral climate: if I slip strong morphine tablets into my aged aunt’s drink with the intention of killing her and gaining an inheritance, I am a murderer, but if she has asked me to do so because she is fed up with living any longer some will say I am good, loving, and wise. Faced with that option, simply quoting the Ten Commandments probably won’t help. We are in a bind: to address the problems we now face, we

need a church steeped for many generations in a wise and mature reading of Scripture, and that is precisely what we haven't got. As we saw again and again at the Lambeth Conference, not least in the material provided for the Bible Studies and the way in which some at least of the groups went, we have got a church where confusion over how to read Scripture reigns unchecked, where on the one hand the half-remembered nostrums of yesterday's scholarship are appealed to in order to ditch a particular saying of Jesus or rubbish a particular idea of Paul's, and where on the other hand passages of Old Testament Law are quoted as though they settled matters without further question. We are like an orchestra suddenly called upon to play a great and complex symphony, only to be embarrassed because we've only been practising nursery rhymes and music-hall songs, and half our players can't cope with keys that have more than two sharps or three flats or time signatures other than fours and threes. The most recent pronouncements of the Archbishop of Canterbury, following the General Convention of The Episcopal Church in Los Angeles in July 2009, demand to be read in the light of a serious biblical and theological approach. Looking through the responses that have appeared at the time of writing, it seems that many either can't or don't want to engage at that level, but are only interested in a 'Yes/No' answer to the questions which, like the later Rabbis with Hillel and Shammai, they bring to a discussion which was actually about something else.

And yet there must be hope, because God is always doing new things, and raising up people with fresh insight and wisdom. The Lambeth Conference, for all its peculiarities of organization and style, was continually refreshed by such people and such moments of insight, in both large and small gatherings. It may be that, in the long and sometimes strange providence of God, there are at this very moment groups of Anglican Christians around the world who are already soaking themselves in Scripture, praying it through, learning it by heart, discussing, and debating its meaning, in ways which embody a grown-up hermeneutic, at once deeply sophisticated (no proof-texts, no cheap 'can't-believe-that-today' shots) and deeply humble, always recognizing that God will have more light to break out of his Word. I often ask groups of church leaders a question like this. Your church, all churches, claim to live under the authority of Scripture, or something like that; very well, if I came into the room and you were actively engaged in that, what would I see going on? Would I see a few people sitting at desks reading commentaries and learned articles? Would I see Parochial Church Councils, or 'Vestries', beginning every meeting with a passage of Scripture, either expounded by one teacher or discussed in groups? Or would I see people

who still read Scripture in public worship but whose lectionaries had quietly removed all the bits people mightn't want to hear? And would I see teachers who had learned in Seminary that Professor So-and-So had said we couldn't believe in healing miracles now that we had electric lights, and had adjusted their reading and teaching in the light of this supposed 'modern knowledge'? The urgent questions we face demand that we nurture a new generation who will commit themselves to the ongoing practice of prayerful, wise, humble Scripture study, both private and corporate.

One thing is sure. If we abandon the attempt, and reduce our Scripture reading to mere liturgical decoration, like an organ voluntary everybody hears but nobody listens to; or to a few phrases stuck into committee reports as though to say 'Look! We are taking the Bible seriously' even though the rest of the document shows no trace of deep biblical insight; or to the boiled-down slogans of those who learned a 'biblical' position many years ago and have long since forgotten that Scripture itself might challenge it to a greater maturity — if we do any of those things, we will wither on the vine, whether in five years or five hundred. But if we set ourselves, particularly our rising generation, the task of living with Scripture prayerfully at every level of our church's life, there is hope. Doing so isn't a way of closing down questions, as some wrongly imagine. It's a way of keeping ourselves humbly open to God's new ways forward. They are bound to be painful, but that is what Scripture itself teaches us to expect. The question is, whether we will be faithful to that calling and fruitful for God's Kingdom.