



# International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church

ISSN: 1474-225X (Print) 1747-0234 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjsc20>

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**To cite this article:** Andrew Goddard (2008) Communion and Covenant: A Theological Exploration, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 8:2, 155-170, DOI: [10.1080/14742250801932059](https://doi.org/10.1080/14742250801932059)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742250801932059>



Published online: 08 May 2008.



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## Communion and Covenant: A Theological Exploration

Andrew Goddard

In discussion of the proposed Anglican covenant, surprisingly little attention has been paid to biblical and theological understandings of covenant-making. After demonstrating this through a survey of the original Windsor Report proposal and subsequent contributions to the covenant process, this article explores six aspects of covenant-making in Scripture relevant to the Anglican Communion crisis and argues that these can and should shape work on the covenant. It draws attention to the bond between covenant-making and communion; the identity-giving nature of covenanting; the importance of promise-making and trust-building within covenants as a response to fractured relationships; the sacrificial nature of covenants; the power of covenants to assist recollection and restoration in relationships; and the missiological heart of God's covenant-making. These characteristics demonstrate some of the theological riches in the concept of 'covenant' which may help the Communion address its current difficulties and should be made more explicit.

**Keywords:** covenant; communion; Anglican Communion; Anglican Covenant; Lambeth Conference; *Windsor Report*; biblical theology; mission

In December 2007, the latest European Union treaty was signed in Lisbon – a treaty which was described by the BBC News website as 'designed to replace the ill-fated EU constitution'. This event reminded me of one of many interesting discussions I have had about the proposed Anglican covenant. As opposition to the idea was growing in certain quarters, the comment was made that we perhaps needed to be wary of focussing too much on the language of 'covenant'. By focussing on the word and idea of 'covenant', the whole purpose and rationale behind the original proposal in *The Windsor Report*<sup>1</sup> could be forgotten. Anglicans might simply get caught up in reactions to the title, which similarly happened as soon as the proposed EU treaty was sent for approval labelled a 'constitution'. Much more important, it was claimed, was that Anglicans should address the problem that the Lambeth Commission on Communion identified, broadly along the lines that they proposed, rather than insisting on something called 'an Anglican Covenant'.

This perceptive comment about the political debate engendered by the proposed Anglican covenant raises the important question of just how significant the use of 'covenant' is, for what is being proposed. In particular, we must ask whether the theological power and weight of the term is of any value or is more of a handicap. This article, in the light of this observation, has a two-fold aim. First, to trace the development of the idea of the proposed covenant, focussing on what it is hoped such a covenant will

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<sup>1</sup>Lambeth Commission on Communion, *Windsor Report 2004*.

achieve for the life of the churches of the Anglican Communion and on the theological content and significance which has been attached to calling it a ‘covenant’. Second, to begin to explore the extent to which a theological understanding of ‘covenant’ may assist in the task of covenant-making.

## I. The history of the proposed Anglican covenant

### *The origins of the covenant idea – The Windsor Report*

The proposal for an Anglican covenant appeared in October 2004 in *The Windsor Report*.<sup>2</sup> It forms, therefore, part of the Anglican Communion’s response to the tensions and divisions arising from disagreements over homosexuality and, specifically, the blessing of same-sex unions, the consecration of a bishop in such a union and the ecclesiological consequences of those actions.

It is significant that the proposal appears in a section (para. 113–20) which combines the proposed covenant with discussion of canon law. This section begins with a discussion of the proposals concerning an ‘unwritten law common to the Churches of the Communion’ (para. 114),<sup>3</sup> noting that most provinces’ canonical systems, ‘are ambivalent to global communion’ (116) and that, in contrast to the growing body of ecumenical law, no church belonging to the Anglican Communion has a systematic body of ‘communion law’.

The Commission’s first recommendation was, therefore, that there be ‘consideration as to how to make the principles of inter-Anglican relations more effective at the local ecclesial level’ (117). Its view was that ‘a brief law would be preferable to and more feasible than incorporation by each church of an elaborate and all-embracing canon defining inter-Anglican relations’ (117). Their reason for rejecting the latter – ‘the lengthy and almost impossible difficulty of steering such a canon unscathed through the legislative processes of forty-four churches’ (117) – is, perhaps, also relevant to the proposed covenant.

The *Windsor Report* then introduces the covenant proposal whose original rationale is the same as that of the ‘communion law’ – it ‘would make explicit and forceful the loyalty and bonds of affection which govern the relationships between the churches of the Communion’ (118). The possible content of the covenant (pointing to a preliminary draft), the manner of its adoption (linking it to the proposed brief communion law), and a ‘long-term process... for real debate and agreement on its adoption’ are then sketched (118) before the Commission outlines an ‘overwhelming’ case for its adoption (119). This offers six arguments which are almost all pragmatic (we cannot repeat the recent conflict, it mirrors ecumenical covenants and assists ecumenical relations, it prevents future unilateralism, it may assist national churches in difficult political contexts, it can be developed as circumstances change). It is, however, noted that this is not just ‘a practical need’, but ‘a theological challenge’ as ‘a covenant incarnates communion as a visible foundation around which Anglicans can gather to shape and protect their distinctive identity and mission’ (119).

The final paragraph insists that ‘the paramount model must remain that of the voluntary association of churches bound together in their love of the Lord of the Church’ (120) but also hints that the covenant could be a possible mark of Anglican distinctiveness within the current membership of the Communion by suggesting that ‘it may be that the Anglican Consultative Council could encourage full participation... by constructing an

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., see section C (‘Our future life together’).

<sup>3</sup>For further discussion, see Doe, ‘The Contribution of Common Principles of Canon Law’.

understanding of communion membership which . . . includes a reference to the Covenant' (120).

These three short paragraphs demonstrate that the original covenant idea was very much a pragmatic response, arising primarily out of a juridical approach, to current difficulties. There is no interest expressed in the theological significance of the term 'covenant' and minimal theological content is offered for the covenant. The draft covenant in Appendix Two of the *Windsor Report* has a strong legal tone and provides no theological reflection upon covenant-making. These comments are not intended to denigrate the proposals, though some criticisms apparently viewed all legal formulations as antithetical to Anglican ecclesiology. Although the draft covenant skilfully expresses, in a focussed manner, the implicit 'unwritten conventions' of our life in communion, in both the report and its draft covenant the original recommendation is theologically 'thin'.

### *The reception of the covenant proposal*

A lack of theological analysis and depth is also evident in most of the responses to the covenant proposal. In November 2004, the Archbishop of Canterbury's Advent Letter<sup>4</sup> commended pursuing a covenant, but theological comment was limited to setting it in a broader ecclesiological context by noting Anglican experience of making covenants with ecumenical partners and asking why appropriate commitments, therefore, could not be freely and honestly made with one another.

The covenant proposal was a major part of the Windsor Reception Process, and the Primates' Standing Committee explicitly asked questions about the arguments for a covenant and the draft. The Reception Group's report and the presentation to the Primates' Meeting at Dromantine, in February 2005, were generally favourable to the idea, but again little attention was paid to theological issues, although the Scottish Primate added a caution reflecting his context, in which covenant theology and the use of such language in ecclesial politics has been particularly important.<sup>5</sup>

The Primates' Dromantine communiqué gave the covenant further momentum, adding to the Archbishop's reference to ecumenical covenants that, 'even within our Communion the Chicago/Lambeth Quadrilateral has already been effectively operating as a form of covenant'.<sup>6</sup> The Anglican Consultative Council (ACC), however, did not comment directly on the Windsor covenant plan although it did commend an alternative covenant – A Covenant for Communion in Mission (resolution 27) – proposed by the Inter Anglican Standing Commission on Mission and Evangelism (IASCOME). This provided (to that point) one of the fullest, though still brief, statements of the biblical and theological rationale for speaking of a covenant:

In Scripture, covenants are central in the Old Testament to God's relationship to Noah, Abraham, Moses, and to the people of Israel. Jeremiah and Ezekiel foretell the coming of a new covenant – in which God will give God's people a new heart and new life and will walk with them, and they with him. In the New Testament Jesus inaugurates this New Covenant. It was marked by the breaking of his body and the shedding of his blood, celebrated in the central Christian meal of the Eucharist and effected through the Resurrection of Jesus the Christ for all people for all time.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Williams, Advent Letter.

<sup>5</sup>Cameron, 'Presentation', Slide 12, 3.

<sup>6</sup>Anglican Communion Primates' Meeting, communiqué, para. 9.

<sup>7</sup>IASCOME, 'Covenant for Communion', Preamble, para. 3.

It noted that 'IASCOME considered in depth the nature of covenant' and outlined a number of features of a covenant. A covenant is:

- 'a serious and significant agreement';
- 'fundamentally about relationships to which one gives oneself voluntarily' (this was then contrasted with the idea of a 'contract' which 'can be seen as a legally binding document under a body of governing principle');
- about 'free-will voluntary offerings from one to another' (again, this was contrasted with contracts described as 'binding entities whose locus of authority is external to oneself');
- 'relational between those who are making the covenant and relational with and before God'.

It is clear from these comments and from the content of their proposed covenant that IASCOME were seeking – in part through their theological contribution – to challenge the perceived juridical and 'contractual' nature of the draft Windsor covenant and to make it more relational and without externally enforceable elements. Despite its strengths, the central problem with this approach is that it does not effectively address the issues that initially led to the proposed covenant.

Further brief theological substance was offered in a document, 'Towards an Anglican Covenant', considered and commended by the Joint Standing Committee (JSC) of the Primates' Meeting and the ACC in March 2006. It noted historical (para. 14), contemporary (para. 15) and legal (para. 16) contexts for the language of covenant but devoted a paragraph (para. 13) to the biblical and theological weight behind 'covenant' terminology.<sup>8</sup>

Following the meeting of the General Convention of the American church, in June 2006 the Archbishop of Canterbury issued 'The Challenge and Hope of Being an Anglican Today: A Reflection for the Bishops, Clergy and Faithful of the Anglican Communion'. This devoted considerable space to the proposed covenant although the focus was, again, primarily practical not theological. Of particular significance was his emphasis that the covenant 'is necessarily an "opt-in" matter', and thus that a covenant could lead to the possible distinction between "'constituent" Churches in covenant in the Anglican Communion and other "churches in association"'.<sup>9</sup>

Only with the September 2006 meeting of the Inter Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission (IATDC) did a fuller theological treatment of the proposal appear, in the form of an 11-page paper entitled, 'Responding to a Proposal of a Covenant'.<sup>10</sup> Its discussion was apparently, in part, framed by the recognition of the potentially differentiating nature of any covenant (s. 2.5) and, as the fullest, official theological discussion of covenant but one which has received little public attention, this paper merits greater summary than other stages in the reception process.

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<sup>8</sup>This reads, in part, 'While the word "covenant" is used to translate and describe the nature of a wide variety of relationships in the Old Testament, its most frequent use is when a divine initiative is met with a human response. The covenant holds out a promise by God which is fulfilled in the faithful response of his people. When there is a failure in faithfulness, a re-commitment is made. In the New Testament, Christians claimed to be in a new covenant relationship with God through the death and resurrection of Jesus and in the gift of the Spirit'. Anglican Communion Office, 'Towards an Anglican Covenant', para. 13.

<sup>9</sup>Williams, 'Challenge and Hope'.

<sup>10</sup>IATDC, 'Responding to a Proposal'.

The long, opening section offers ‘a theology for the life of a covenanted community’. That title shows IATDC’s focus is less on covenant and covenant-making and more on what it means to be a ‘covenant community’ (the phrase appears 10 times in pp. 3–5). It begins with a summary of God’s redemptive purposes and notes that biblically, covenant is ‘a key term’ focussing the understanding of ‘God and God’s purposes’ (s. 1.2). The term is then explored through an exposition of God’s loving initiative in his various covenants from Abraham, through Israel’s history to the promise of a new covenant fulfilled in Christ. Attention is then focussed on what this means for our life together, particularly our calling and unity and its relationship to uses of the language of covenant (s. 1.8). While our ‘covenants’ are not somehow the same as God’s covenant with his people, it is claimed that:

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 explored above: 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.<sup>11</sup>

The lack of prominence of ‘covenant’ ideas in Anglican traditions is noted (s. 1.10), but the importance of a relational understanding of worldwide Anglicanism is emphasised; and, so it is claimed that the proposal of an explicit covenant is not alien but draws from Anglicanism’s scriptural roots and experience of ‘bonds of affection’ (s. 1.11). As a result, ‘since the idea of “covenant” has a long and powerful biblical tradition, it is filled with possibilities for the ordering of our life together as Anglican Christians’ (s. 2.1).

The IATDC then examines models of covenant. The Windsor model is helpful but limited and ‘would not pick up on the inter-personal and relational issues so prominent within the biblical examples of covenant’ (s. 2.2). Following the biblical example of Deuteronomy, it is argued a covenant should have both narrative/recital and visionary/commitment components and the ‘juridical’ Windsor model (which may achieve too much and provoke schism) is contrasted with the ‘motivational’ IASCOME proposal. However, something purely motivational ‘may lack the ability to require serious commitments and thus achieve too little’ (s. 2.5).

The IATDC paper is then less directly relevant to the theology of covenant as it is focussed on conflict and conflict resolution in the Church, and the need to develop new institutions. Its final section (s. 6.3) concludes with a commendation of a covenant that enables Anglicans to recommit to one another in renewed obedience to God’s call:

A re-affirmation of our commitment to one another in covenant would thereby become a re-commitment in hope of the reconciliation of all things in Christ, who has established our peace by the blood of his cross (Colossians 1.20).<sup>12</sup>

With the notable exception of this IATDC paper, the reception process provides very little sustained theological reflection and assessment related to the significance of covenant-making. Furthermore, the IATDC focuses more on what it means to understand ourselves as a ‘covenant community’ (with particular concern for unity and conflict resolution) rather than a theological account of what might be involved in the activity of covenant creation.

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<sup>11</sup>IATDC, ‘Responding to a Proposal’, s. 1.8.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., s. 6.3.

### ***The Covenant Design Group***

In September 2006, the Archbishop of Canterbury announced the structure and Chair (Archbishop Drexel Gomez) of a Covenant Design Group (CDG) whose membership was announced in January 2007, shortly before its first meeting. That first meeting produced a brief report and draft covenant (structured – perhaps in the light of IATDC’s comment on Deuteronomy – in the form of affirmations and commitments). The Primates and JSC commended these for wider discussion in February 2007 (with initial reflections on the draft’s content), and the CDG’s next meeting was to be in late January 2008 to work on revising its proposals for the Lambeth Conference.<sup>13</sup>

The CDG’s brief report again focuses on the practicalities, rather than developing any theology of covenant. The draft covenant itself, interestingly, only uses the term ‘covenant’ six times. Most of these refer to the document itself, one refers to the ‘covenant relationship’ it establishes, and one (in the preamble) refers to the task being undertaken: ‘We, the Churches of the Anglican Communion, under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, solemnly covenant together in these articles . . .’.

This use of the term highlights the point, raised by the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations (IASCER) in December 2006 and important for the theological discussion that follows in section II of this article, that, “‘to covenant’ with someone carries different connotations from having a covenant with someone’ and that the CDG ‘could profitably explore working with the concept as a verb’.

### ***Conclusion***

It is clear from this account that, despite concerns about its rhetorical effect, the language of ‘covenant’ has been much more simply a descriptive label for the way the Communion is addressing its practical difficulties. ‘Covenant’ is not a determinative theological concept shaping the response. The label has been applied to three, quite different, semi-official documents (only one of which explicitly discusses the theology of covenant itself) and, with the exception of the IADTC paper (where the focus was on the Church as a covenant community), relatively little attention has been paid to the theological significance of the term either as a noun or a verb. The second part of this paper aims to begin to sketch some possible benefits in redressing this situation through a theological locating of the concept of ‘covenant’ and ‘covenant-making’.

## **II. Towards a theology of covenant-making**

### ***Theological background***

The source for all theological discussion of covenant is clearly the biblical use of the term, discussed in the IATDC paper. IATDC fails, however, to note (perhaps because of its focus on the people of God as the covenant community) that the first biblical use of the term is not actually the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 15 but the earlier covenant God makes with Noah, his descendants and all creation (in Genesis 6.18, 9.9, 12). Acknowledgment that this is the original divine covenant may helpfully act as a reminder to Anglicans that not only must our covenant-making have an ecumenical dimension (because the covenant community is wider than the Anglican Communion) but that God’s

<sup>13</sup>The relevant texts and other resources are available online at: <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/commission/covenant/index.cfm>

covenantal purposes are global and cosmic (a theme returned to below in relation to mission). It also gives the assurance that, important though Anglican conflicts and potential divisions are, they need to be set in the wider context of God's promised faithfulness to his whole creation.

The prominence and significance of 'covenant' in the rest of Scripture, especially the Old Testament, as God's self-revelation and redemptive purposes unfold has been widely discussed by numerous biblical theologians. The Old Testament uses the key Hebrew word for covenant, *berit*, 287 times and, as a whole, it witnesses four divine covenants (with Noah, Abraham, Moses at Sinai and with David) which give Israel her identity as God's covenant community (discussed by IATDC). The central meaning of 'covenant' is given by Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, as 'an enduring commitment by God and his people based on mutual vows of loyalty and mutual obligation through which both parties have their lives radically affected and empowered'.<sup>14</sup> Importantly, the Old Testament also uses the language of covenant for agreements between humans such as international treaties and bonds of personal friendship (perhaps, given the context for the Anglican covenant, 1 Sam 18.1–3 is the best example). The so-called 'covenant formula' – 'I will take you as my people, and I will be your God' or 'I will be your God, and you shall be my people' – appears first in Exodus 6: 7 and reappears in similar form, not only in the Pentateuch (for example Lev 26.12, Deut 26.17–19, 29.12–13) but also the historical books (such as 2 Sam 7.24) and the prophets (in Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah).<sup>15</sup> Even where the language of covenant is not explicit or is less prominent (for example, the early prophets), the relationship between God and Israel is still one that we can legitimately describe as covenantal. The same applies in relation to the New Testament where although the term 'is relatively rare',<sup>16</sup> its appearance in central passages (for example Luke 1.72, Mark 14.24, Romans 9–11, 2 Corinthians 3, Hebrews 8) confirms and highlights the impossibility of understanding the gospel without an understanding of the concept of covenant, the history and purposes of God's covenants and the way in which the long-promised 'new covenant' is now established in Christ and by the Spirit.<sup>17</sup>

Unsurprisingly, given its biblical significance, the concept of covenant has been influential in later Christian theological development, especially at the time of the Reformation and in the later Reformed tradition when, as Goldingay notes, 'the scriptural talk about a series of covenants did originally provide Calvin, Bullinger and Cocceius with a way of articulating biblical faith that worked more with scriptural categories than the Christian tradition as they inherited it, and specifically recognised its dynamic, narrative nature'.<sup>18</sup> This led, in certain Protestant circles, to an elaborate confessional and systematic theology structured around the divine covenants which were even stretched back, in some theologies, to a covenant of works in Eden, as articulated in the 1646 Westminster Confession (most obviously, chap. VIII, 'Of God's Covenant with Man'). This same period saw, of course, the earlier Scottish Presbyterian rebellion by the Covenanters against enforced episcopacy from England which led the Scottish Primate to warn about some of the echoes of the language of covenant.

<sup>14</sup>Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense*, 10.

<sup>15</sup>See further discussion in Baker, 'Covenant: An Old Testament Study', 21–53.

<sup>16</sup>McKnight, 'Covenant', 142.

<sup>17</sup>N.T. Wright, now Bishop of Durham and a member of both the Lambeth Commission and IATDC, wrote in the preface to his *Climax of the Covenant*, 'The overall title reflects my growing conviction that covenant theology is one of the main clues, usually neglected, for understanding Paul'. Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, preface, xi.

<sup>18</sup>Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 369–70 with reference to Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, 55.



While this context of conflict with early Anglicanism perhaps explains the relative paucity of covenant theology within Anglicanism (as noted by IATDC, though of course the marriage service of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* refers explicitly to the marriage as ‘the covenant betwixt them made’), recent work has shown how significant ‘covenant’ is in the work of William Tyndale (commemorated on October 6, in the Church of England’s lectionary). As Rowan Williams notes in his foreword to Ralph S. Werrell’s recent study,

The essence of this theology, as Dr Werrell demonstrates, is a set of convictions about covenant; and Tyndale’s originality lies in the place he gives to God’s covenant with himself, the covenant between the three Persons of the Trinity whereby God the Father establishes eternally how he will be the father of his creatures, through the incarnation and sacrifice of the Son and the gift of the Spirit.<sup>19</sup>

Theology of covenant is, however, not a matter of only biblical or historical theology. It remains a central feature of much contemporary dogmatic or systematic theology with Karl Barth giving prominence to a Christocentric covenantal understanding,<sup>20</sup> and the three recent volumes from the Reformed theologian, Michael S. Horton, structure Christian theology around covenant.<sup>21</sup>

In light of this heritage, the relative lack of serious theological discussion concerning whether anything we know about God and his covenant-making activity speaks to our situation and whether it can shape our covenant-making is even more astonishing. What follows can only be a sketch, but it is based on the belief that there are important theological resources related to the theology of covenant that can assist the Communion when it is considering the creation of an Anglican Covenant. The underlying rationale here is that the hallmarks of God’s covenantal activity towards us can (and should) give some shape and structure to our own covenant-making, communion-building activity towards one another. This is based on the principle articulated by Old Testament scholar John Goldingay in the following terms:

Yhwh thereby sets the standard for human covenants. We usually think in terms of human covenants providing the model for understanding divine covenants . . . as we understand divine fatherhood through the experience of human fatherhood. But substantially, divine fatherhood is prior and so is divine covenanting.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Covenant and communion***<sup>23</sup>

Communion theology and ecclesiology is now well-established in Anglicanism and wider ecumenical (particularly Roman Catholic) ecclesiology. Within Anglican discussions, the document ‘Mutual Responsibility and Interdependence in the Body of Christ’<sup>24</sup> articulated some of the implications of this approach. It lies at the heart of *The Windsor Report* and it appears that the content of any covenant is going to embody this tradition of thinking. The theological relationship of covenant to communion has, however, received little elaboration.

<sup>19</sup>Williams, ‘Foreword’, 5.

<sup>20</sup>See, for example, the discussion in Busch, *The Great Passion*, especially chap. II.2, ‘The Fulfilled Covenant’; Gibson and Strange, *Engaging with Barth*, see chap. ‘Karl Barth and Covenant Theology’.

<sup>21</sup>Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology; Lord and Servant; Covenant and Salvation*.

<sup>22</sup>Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 174.

<sup>23</sup>This is based on a fuller discussion in Goddard, ‘Unity and Diversity’.

<sup>24</sup>Bayne, *Mutual Responsibility*.

The biblical witness is that covenant-making is God's initiative of love and his means of expressing his will for communion with us and with the whole of creation. Indeed, in covenant theologies among Reformers, the covenants God makes with us in history are set in the context of what is conceived as an eternal covenant within the Trinity to be in fellowship with creation and, in particular, with human beings who are made in God's image for communion with him.

This covenantal divine will for communion establishes and gives to us our communion with one another in Christ. We need therefore to emphasise in all our covenant-making that this is not in order to create communion – that has been created by God and graciously given to us as a gift. Here is perhaps a valid theological concern behind IASCOME's contrast between covenant and contract – the latter is usually understood as something entered by our own volition in order to achieve some goal; but our common life in Christ is not something constructed by us but rather received and recognised by us as a gift. While, as the Archbishop noted, any Anglican covenant is in an important sense an 'opt-in' development, our covenant-making should be a way of expressing the communion which we are called to with one another by God and which is already God's gift to us established in and through Christ. Although therefore we do not create communion by means of our own covenants, nevertheless covenant-making is, given the pattern of God's action, a highly appropriate way of giving expression to our acceptance of – and our desire to nourish and deepen – our communion with one another in Christ. We must, however, insist that because our communion with one another is ultimately God's work of communion accomplished by means of God's covenant, any ecclesial covenant we create in order to express and encourage the communion that we have been given among ourselves, must be founded in and shaped by the character of God's initiating work of establishing communion with us and among us in his various covenants and, supremely, in the new covenant in Christ's blood.

### ***Covenant and identity***

Biblically, covenant also plays a crucial role in expressing and giving identity. Within the ancient world, covenants often conferred identity on a people in the form of political power and enslavement, particularly after war and conquest. Within Scripture, however, covenant is an initiative of grace in which God identifies himself as the God who is committed to those with whom he covenants. As Christ reminds those who challenge him on resurrection – 'God has said "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"' (Matthew 22.32). He is, in other words, the God who is known and identified by his covenant-making activity and the company he keeps, as a result of his covenant. In the light of the new covenant, of course, he is most fully known as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (for example Hebrews 13.20, 21).

That divine covenant-making activity also identifies God as the giving God – 'I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, where they lived as aliens' (Exodus 6.4) – and, at Sinai, the liberating God – 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery' (Exodus 20.2).

Israel, in turn, is given her identity as a result of God's covenant with her. She is not to construct her own identity but to understand herself as God's chosen covenant partner, identified, called and named by God. God's covenant activity in and for Israel, in turn, places limits on her own covenant-making as making other covenants will (and of course, in her history, does) break her covenant with God and deny who she is called to be (for example Exodus 23.31–2).

There are, perhaps, two contrasting implications of this connection between covenant and identity for any Anglican covenant. First, by drawing attention to our fundamental identity as something given to us by God's covenants and, supremely, in Christ this relativises any covenant we create within part of God's people. There is here a reminder of the limits of any *Anglican* covenant and a warning that, in focussing on covenanting with one another, we must not lose sight of the whole people of God, both those with whom we already have entered formal covenants and others. Second, however and in a certain tension with this, there has to be a recognition that covenant-making and identity-formation are inextricably linked. Part of the task of the Anglican covenant is, therefore, not to impose a new identity on the Communion but rather to give expression to the distinctive Anglican identity that, in God's providence, has already been received by the churches of the Communion through their common life together. As the IATDC put it, 'A covenant for the Anglican Communion should reflect the memory of Anglican historical traditions and also summarise our present understanding of "the Anglican way"'.<sup>25</sup> This is, in large part, what the affirmation sections<sup>26</sup> of the first draft covenant seek to achieve but this also explains why the content of the covenant has become such a focus for debate and disagreement, as it draws out contrasting and potentially incompatible understandings of what it means to be Anglican.

In considering both these aspects of the relationship between covenant and identity – the identity given to us by God's new covenant in Christ and our specific Anglican identity which will be articulated and, to a certain extent, strengthened by an Anglican covenant – particular attention needs to be paid to the advice of the IASCER, in response to the idea of a covenant: 'The covenant should not enshrine a particular moment in Anglican history, but enable the Anglican Communion in future to enter into communion with other churches'.<sup>27</sup>

### *Covenant, promise and trust*

In later Christian tradition, many theologians used covenant language in relation to God's work of creation. This was either in general terms, such as Barth's famous dictum that creation is the external basis of the covenant and the covenant is the internal basis of creation, or in terms of human beings, made in God's image, created to be God's covenant partners. As has been noted, however, the language of covenant does not appear explicitly in the Genesis creation narratives (though links are drawn in other parts of the Old Testament between creation and covenant). The first covenant is God's response to human violence and sin. Goldingay comments,

By not speaking of the relationship between God and the first human beings as a covenant, Genesis has perhaps implied that there was no need for formally binding commitments before the time of human disobedience and divine punishment. Those events have imperilled the relationship on both sides. God cannot trust human beings, and human beings cannot trust God. So now God makes a formal and solemn binding commitment to humanity.<sup>28</sup>

Covenant, biblically, therefore is an initiative of grace to a situation of disobedience, uncertainty and mistrust. It seeks to address the malaise of such a context of broken

<sup>25</sup>IATDC, 'Responding to a Proposal', s. 1.8.

<sup>26</sup>IATDC, 'Responding to a Proposal', s. 2, 4 and 5.

<sup>27</sup>IASCER, 'Responding to the Idea of a Covenant', para. 14.d.

<sup>28</sup>Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 181.

relationships by means of expressing a will for communion by promise-making. Bruggemann's definition of covenant quoted previously ('an enduring commitment by God and his people based on mutual vows of loyalty and mutual obligation...') is supported by the explanation offered in the Anchor Bible Dictionary article on covenant:

A 'covenant' is an agreement enacted between two parties in which one or both make promises under oath to perform or refrain from certain actions stipulated in advance.<sup>29</sup>

There can be little doubt that one central feature of the current Anglican malaise is a breakdown of trust and actions which have 'imperilled the relationship' between churches of the Communion. This context makes the task of covenant-making even more challenging and agreeing to a form of words clearly cannot, in and of itself, re-establish trust where it has broken down. However, the biblical witness points to there being a logic to responding in a situation such as this with a covenant, in which promises are made and commitments entered into 'to perform or refrain from certain actions stipulated in advance'. This is, in large part, what the commitment sections (s. 1, 3 and 6) of the draft covenant seek to achieve and why IATDC was correct to warn against a purely 'motivational' or 'descriptive' covenant. It is not simply that this 'may lack the ability to require serious commitments and thus achieve too little' (s. 2.5) but that it would not do justice to the richness and costliness of a theological understanding of covenant-making shaped by God's covenant-making activity.

As seen in the human covenant which, biblically, most vividly displays the nature of God's covenant love – marriage – a covenant is centred on making a promise of love to another about a shared but unknown future. The English House of Bishops' remarks about the importance of promises in the marriage service are shaped by the biblical testimony to God's covenants and should therefore frame any Anglican covenant:

If love is to grow, it needs an explicit commitment of the couple to stay with each other through changing circumstances, through personal development and growth... Making promises 'before God and in the face of this congregation' declares our conscious willingness to view love not merely as a comfort, but as a lifelong responsibility. But the promises are also liberating. Through them we focus our intentions and offer one another a shared future in a way that we could hardly dare to do otherwise... By making our promises before God in a setting of prayer, and listening to his promises to us, we can be assured of his faithful love to sustain our own weak resolve to be faithful.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Covenant and sacrifice***

Another classic theological definition of covenant is that offered by G.R. Dunstan who, in an article exploring marriage as covenant, highlights five features of God's covenants in Scripture that also help our thinking about ecclesiological rather than divine or marital covenants.<sup>31</sup> First, the covenant is an initiative of love inviting a response. Second, it is secured by an oath or vow. Third, it entails obligations of faithfulness. Fourth, it contains promises of blessing; and fifth, it is marked by sacrifice.

Dunstan's final linkage between covenant and sacrifice is a crucial feature of God's covenant-making in Scripture (seen for example in the early covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 and the covenant ceremony described in Exodus 24) and is supremely

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<sup>29</sup>Mendenhall and Herion, 'Covenant', 1:1179.

<sup>30</sup>House of Bishops, *Marriage*, 10.

<sup>31</sup>Dunstan, 'The Marriage Covenant'.

demonstrated in the cross (for example 1 Corinthians 11.25, Hebrews 12.23, 24). Scripture makes clear that all covenant-making involves sacrifice on the part of covenant partners as they express their will for communion, acknowledge their identities are bound together and, make promises to one another in order to build trust. The relevance of this to any Anglican covenant was first noted in the discussion paper, 'Towards An Anglican Covenant' where the authors state:

It is striking that covenants most frequently originate in the initiative of God, and elicit the costly sacrifice of faithful response by his covenant people to his work. The covenant relationship with God generates a covenantal relationship between his people. We do not underestimate the cost that being in covenant may exact on the churches of the Communion (para. 13).

While it may initially appear that certain parts of the Communion are particularly making sacrifices if they enter into a covenant, all parties are making sacrifices. They are doing so by making the commitments they make and undertaking the obligations of the covenant. They are doing so by acknowledging, through their covenanting with each other, that they are not autonomous but rather interdependent members of the one body who need to be led together by the Spirit who blows where he wills but is also the bringer of peace and not disorder who is not found only in their part of the church (cf. 1 Corinthians 14.29–33).

### ***Covenant, recollection and restoration***

A fifth feature of the biblical testimony is that covenant-making is a spur to remembering and also to restoring relationships when they are damaged, broken and forgotten. This is, astonishingly, even presented as one of the functions of covenant-making in relation to God (see, for example, Genesis 9.15, Exodus 2.24, Leviticus 26.42, Psalm 106.45). Goldingay comments that 'think about' is a better translation than 'remember' (as the verb suggests a deliberate act and implies action will follow) and that 'it is the covenant that obliges Yhwh to respond to Israel's cry . . . Thinking about this covenant would bring home the obligation that rested on Yhwh'.<sup>32</sup>

Here, again, there is a pattern in the revelation of God's covenants that gives a rationale for human covenant-making and a further motivation for the development of an Anglican covenant. A formal covenant would be a constant reminder to each of the churches of the Communion concerning the wider fellowship of churches to which they are bound and whose life they must consider and remember when making decisions within their own autonomous provinces. Furthermore, when relationships become impaired and some form of judgment may be required, the covenant is a reminder of the deeper commitments within which any such judgment must occur and a means of ensuring that all actions towards one another must be ordered towards restoration of any broken covenant relationships. There is therefore strong biblical and theological basis for the covenant to include a recognition of the potentially damaging effects of sin on covenanted relationships but the need for covenantal grace and love to triumph. The initial draft seeks to do this in its final specific commitment (s. 6.6) where although covenanting churches may fail to adhere to the covenant and be considered to 'have relinquished for themselves the force and meaning of the covenant's purpose', there must then be 'a process of restoration and renewal . . . to re-establish their covenant relationship with other member churches'.

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<sup>32</sup>Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 302, 303.

### ***Covenant and mission***

Finally, and crucially, there is the theological bond between covenant and mission. One of the dangers in the current context and backdrop to the proposed covenant is that covenant-making can simply become a matter of navel-gazing and internal house-keeping. The danger in the Windsor draft was that little or no attention was given either to the theological meaning of covenant or to the missionary heart of Anglicanism. The weakness in IATDC's discussion of covenant was that it focussed, in particular, on 'the covenant community'. The strength in IASCOME's approach was that it explicitly related covenant to mission:

We believe that a Covenant enshrining the values of common mission that could be used as a basis for outward-looking relationships among the churches, mission organisations and societies, and networks of the Communion would provide a significant focus of unity in mission for the Anglican Communion.<sup>33</sup>

The theological starting-point for all discussion of communion and covenant must be God and his mission to the world and the acknowledgment that the Church is – and so must order its life around being – God's agent of mission in the world. The mission of God is one of establishing communion and God's means in this mission is, as has been noted, his covenant-making. Despite its weaknesses, IATDC acknowledges this inextricable tie between mission and covenant as any discussion of the Abrahamic covenant ('and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you') must do:

God established a covenant (*berit*) with Abraham (Genesis 15), 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. Genesis 12, 15 and the whole story address the problem set out in Genesis 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 (Genesis 1–2). *And these texts claim – this claim is echoed right across the Old Testament – that God has in principle solved that problem with the establishment of this covenant.* (Genesis 1.2, emphasis added).<sup>34</sup>

The goal of God's covenant-making is the spread of God's mission expressed in covenantal terms of communion-creating and promise-making that brings hope and restores trust in the face of human sin and broken relationships. As Richard Bauckham has shown, the biblical narrative shows how God's mission moves out from the one to the many – the covenants with Abraham, with Israel and with David are all directed to the families of the earth, all nations and the ends of the earth.<sup>35</sup> This covenantal mission has been most fully explored recently by Christopher Wright in his *magnum opus*, *The Mission of God*. Chapter 10 explores the 'span of God's missional covenant' showing how the biblical covenants are missional and climax in the new covenant in Christ and the new covenant command of the Great Commission. Wright shows this is 'thoroughly covenantal and indeed Deuteronomic' in form and content, as it comprises God's self-introduction as King, the imperative demands of the covenant relationship and promises of blessing. He concludes his chapter with reference to the Emmaus Road exposition recorded in Luke 24.5–48.

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<sup>33</sup>IASCOME, 'Covenant for Communion', Preamble, para. 2.

<sup>34</sup>IATDC, 'Responding to a Proposal', s. 1.2.

<sup>35</sup>Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, especially chap. 2.

The covenants form an essential part of that Christian reading of the Old Testament Scriptures, which, as Jesus pointed out, must be both *messianic* (because they all lead ultimately to Christ) and *missiologically* (because they lead to repentance and forgiveness being preached in the name of Christ to all nations). The mission of God is as integral to the sequence of the covenants as they are to the overarching grand narrative of the whole Bible.<sup>36</sup>

For the Anglican Communion to turn, in this time of crisis, to covenant-making is therefore, if considered theologically, not to turn away from the world to focus only on the life of the covenant community. To think covenantally about our life together must be to think outwardly and missiologically. Although the proposed covenant recognises this in the affirmations and commitments of its fourth section, with their recommitment to the Five Marks of Mission, much more could be done to make it more central to the covenant that the life of the Communion has grown from mission and to demonstrate that, even if not in the form that IASCOME proposed, what is needed both practically and theologically is indeed a covenant for communion in mission.

### III. Conclusion

Having begun with the concern that the language of ‘covenant’ may be unhelpful given its political impact and the specific, practical challenges that the original proposal of a covenant sought to address, section I showed how little attention has actually been given to the significance of the terminology of covenant in most of the responses to *The Windsor Report’s* recommendation. In particular, the theological significance of speaking of a ‘covenant’ has been given relatively little serious thought and even where there has been discussion, it has focussed on how we might think of the Church as a covenantal but also conflictual community rather than the nature and purpose of covenant-making. Section II has sketched out six wider key biblical and theological themes related to covenant-making and, in so doing has shown how, in fact, ‘covenant’ should be much more than a helpful label which carries a mix of theological, juridical and political overtones. The details of any Anglican covenant cannot be determined by a theology of covenant alone, as they must engage effectively with the current realities of Communion life. The theological riches found in such a theology do, however, speak very directly to these current realities and their relative neglect, in much of the discussion so far, has prevented a biblical theology of covenant providing a more explicit shape and focus for our covenant-making based on the nature and character of the covenant-making of God himself.

### Notes on contributor

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<sup>36</sup>Wright, *The Mission of God*, 356. For four engagements with this important work and Wright’s response see *Anvil* 24, no. 4 (2007).

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