The Baptismal Covenant and the Proposed Anglican Covenant

Ruth A. Meyers

rmeyers@cdsp.edu

ABSTRACT

An exploration of the development and meaning of the text of the Baptismal Covenant in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church provides the basis for a discussion of the proposed Anglican Communion Covenant. The article concludes by suggesting how biblical, theological and liturgical understandings of covenant offer a perspective by which to assess the proposed Covenant for the Anglican Communion.

KEYWORDS: Anglican Covenant, baptism, covenant, creed, Episcopal Church, ministry

Introduction

In discussions of the proposed Anglican Communion Covenant, some Episcopalians have suggested that the only covenant needed is the Baptismal Covenant. But this proposal is a non-starter. The Baptismal Covenant that has become so familiar in the Episcopal Church since 1979 is not a shared text among churches of the Anglican Communion. However, reflection on the Baptismal Covenant provides a useful perspective from which to assess the proposed Anglican Communion Covenant.

The Baptismal Covenant in the Episcopal Church

Prior to the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, the baptismal rite in prayer books of the Episcopal Church had directed the minister to ask adult

1. Ruth A. Meyers is Hodges-Haynes Professor of Liturgics, Church Divinity School of the Pacific, Berkeley, CA.
candidates or the parents and godparents of infants and young children: ‘Dost thou believe all the Articles of the Christian Faith, as contained in the Apostles’ Creed?’ and ‘Wilt thou then obediently keep God’s holy will and commandments, and walk in the same all the days of thy life?’

The text of the Baptismal Covenant coalesced gradually over the course of prayer book revision, which began when the 1967 General Convention authorized revision of the prayer book and continued until the 1976 General Convention approved the new book.

Initially, the drafting committee proposed a rather modest restatement of the earlier questions: the Apostles’ Creed in interrogatory form in its entirety, followed by two questions: ‘Will you then obey and follow Christ as your Lord and Savior?’ and ‘Will you in Christ seek and serve him in all men, loving your neighbor as yourself?’ As the process of prayer book revision continued during the late 1960s and early 1970s, respondents suggested additional questions. First, the committee added a question about social action, reflecting a heightened emphasis on social justice in the late 1960s: ‘Will you strive for justice, peace, and human dignity among men and nations?’ Then, after a respondent noted that someone could seek and serve Christ and strive for justice without ever participating in the Eucharist, the committee introduced a question based on Acts 2.42: ‘Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers?’ Later, in order to strengthen expressions of penitence, the committee added this question: ‘Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?’ Near the end of the process, questions were revised to utilize gender-inclusive language, a sensitivity that was emerging in the early 1970s.

The title ‘Baptismal Covenant’ appeared late in the process. The section of the rite that includes the presentation of candidates and their profession of faith was revised and rearranged numerous times.


3. In the Episcopal Church, the Book of Common Prayer is established by the Constitution, which also sets forth procedures for revision. Except for revision of the lectionary, any revision of the Book of Common Prayer must be voted on by two successive General Conventions. Hence after being approved as the ‘proposed’ book in 1976, the Prayer Book was ‘adopted’ by the 1979 Convention.

over the course of the revision work. A 1973 draft separated questions of renunciation and affirmation directed to the candidates (including sponsors of infant candidates) from the creedal questions and questions of commitment to a Christian life, to which the entire congregation responded. The minister introduced the congregational portion with an invitation to ‘renew our own baptismal covenant’.\(^5\) Only in the penultimate draft of the rite, published in 1975, was the title added.\(^6\)

Bryan Spinks has argued that the Baptismal Covenant could be regarded as semi-Pelagian because the questions eliciting a commitment to a Christian life of worship, service and witness precede the administration of the water, a sequence suggesting that the grace of baptism conveyed in the baptismal water may be contingent upon the candidates’ promises.\(^7\) Yet Spinks does not seem to recognize that the questions of commitment are an expansion of the second question in the 1662 Anglican rite, to which he does not apply the same criticism.\(^8\)

In fact, there is great wisdom in the structure and flow of the Baptismal Covenant. The promises are directly related to the creedal questions. Viewed from biblical, historical and ecumenical perspective, the Baptismal Covenant is primarily about God and the relationship God establishes with us in baptism. This is why the Creed is so important. It tells us who God is and what God has done for us. It tells us that God loves us and calls us into relationship.

The creedal questions summarize our trinitarian faith. In response to the questions, the assembly proclaims belief in God, whom we

\(^5\) Holy Baptism, together with A Form for Confirmation or the Laying-On of Hands by the Bishop with the Affirmation of Baptismal Vows, Prayer Book Studies 26 (New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1973), p. 12. An introduction to this rite makes no comment on the term ‘baptismal covenant’, suggesting that it was unremarkable in the eyes of the drafting committee and Standing Liturgical Commission: Daniel B. Stevick, Holy Baptism, together with a Form for the Affirmation of Baptismal Vows with the Laying-On of Hands by the Bishop also called Confirmation, Supplement to Prayer Book Studies 26 (New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1973).


\(^8\) Spinks describes the changes introduced in 1662, which include the addition of the question ‘Wilt thou then obediently keep God’s holy will and commandments, and walk in the same all the days of thy life?’ as ‘mainly cosmetic and stylistic’. Reformation and Modern Rituals, p. 77.
know because God the creator of heaven and earth also sent Jesus and continues to send the Spirit. It is here that the creedal questions of the Baptismal Covenant link to the questions of commitment. God who sent the Son and sends the Spirit into the world also sends the Church. God who yearns to draw the whole world into the divine life calls us to participate in God’s self-giving love for the sake of the world. Theologian Catherine Mowry LaCugna explains this dynamic:

Ecclesial life is a way of living in anticipation of the coming reign of God … The mission, the ‘being sent forth’ of every Christian, is the same as the mission of Christ and the Spirit, to do the will and work of God, to proclaim the good news of salvation, to bring peace and concord, to justify hope in the final return of all things to God.9

The covenant of baptism is fundamentally God’s initiative, just as God established a covenant with Noah (Gen. 9.8-17), with Abraham (Gen. 17.1-22), with the Israelites in the time of Moses (Exod. 19.3–20.21), and with David (2 Sam. 7.5-16). In the Baptismal Covenant we begin by professing our faith in the triune God, and so we remember who we are and whose we are, we remember what God has done for us, and we remember that God in Christ establishes a covenant with us. Our response to that covenant is to live as Jesus Christ lived, to live according to power of the Holy Spirit, to participate in God’s self-giving love for the world.

The promises made in the last five questions of the Baptismal Covenant spell out how we will respond to God’s initiative. The sequence of grace, then response, is implicit in the sequence of the Baptismal Covenant. Even then, it is not all about human effort. To each question about commitment, the assembly responds, ‘I will, with God’s help.’ Salvation lies not in what we do ourselves, but in what God does for us and through us and with us.

One gift of the Baptismal Covenant in the Episcopal Church is a renewed understanding of the significance of baptism as the foundation of Christian faith and life. Bonnie Anderson, President of the House of Deputies, explained this perspective in response to a 2010 New York Times article about clergy burnout:

Ministry is not solely the work of professionally trained clergy. Rather it is a shared enterprise in which lay people are equal partners. Clergy burnout occurs because both parties lose sight of this fact. The result is clergy who believe that they must meet everyone’s needs while playing

the role of a lone superhero, and members of the laity who are either infantilized or embittered because they cannot make meaningful contributions to their church.

Embracing a circular ministry model that values and uses the gifts of laity and clergy while sharing power and authority engages everyone in the work of reconciliation. The big questions are: Will the clergy be able to give up their ascribed power? And will the laity be able to step up to the challenge of their baptism?10

A role for laity in the leadership of the church may be traced to the origins of the Episcopal Church as a colonial church planted apart from any meaningful oversight by bishops. Our first steps toward self-governance after the Revolutionary War were taken by conventions of laity and clergy because there were no bishops in the colonies or nascent United States. Nevertheless, the baptismal emphasis of the 1979 Prayer Book marks a significant shift. Previous prayer books had used essentially the rite we inherited from the Church of England. A baptismal promise to walk in God’s ways was implicit in the sixteenth-century rites and made explicit in 1662. But this rather vaguely worded question became much more explicit in the 1979 Baptismal Covenant.

**Anglican Understandings of Covenant**

Prior to the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, the language of ‘covenant’ was not part of Anglican baptismal rites. Godparents made a ‘solemn promise and vow’ on behalf of infant candidates, a vow that included, according to the Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer, renunciation of the devil, the world, and the flesh; affirmation of the Christian faith as articulated in the Apostles’ Creed; and a promise to ‘keep God’s holy will and commandments’. This vow is a human action, a promise made in response to the promises of Christ in the Gospel. While some scholars see this as essentially a covenant, others emphasize that Thomas Cranmer, chief architect of the sixteenth-century prayer books, avoided the term ‘covenant’.11

A more explicit understanding that baptism involves a covenant became common among Anglican theologians during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Influenced by Reformed theology in which covenant was central to the meaning of baptism, Anglican divines

spoke of the covenant entered into at baptism. ‘The whole life of a Christian man and woman should be a continual reflection how in Baptism we entered into covenant with Christ’, wrote John Hacket, Bishop of Lichfield and Coventry in 1671. Samuel Wesley encouraged regular renewal of that covenant by participation in the Eucharist: ‘By baptism we are admitted into the new covenant, and because there are few who come to age without having been guilty of some breaches of this Covenant, we do, after we have taken it upon ourselves in confirmation, renew it again at the Holy Communion’. For Samuel’s son John, renewal of the covenant at communion was not enough, and John Wesley urged an annual renewal.12

The language of ‘covenant’ introduced in the 1979 prayer book has been adopted in a few other churches of the Anglican Communion. Representatives of the Anglican Church of Canada attended meetings of the Standing Liturgical Commission as the Prayer Book was being revised. So it is not surprising that the baptismal rite of the 1985 Canadian Book of Alternative Services is quite similar to the 1979 rite, including the Baptismal Covenant.13 The churches in Mexico and Central America, which until the 1990s were part of the Episcopal Church, continue to use Spanish translations of the 1979 Prayer Book, including the baptismal rite with the covenant. The Prayer Book of the Philippine Episcopal Church has a Baptismal Covenant with an additional question about diligence in the study of scripture.14 Contemporary rites in Brazil and Melanesia use some but not all of the questions in their Baptismal Covenant.15

Other churches in the Anglican Communion have also introduced a more contemporary form of the 1662 question ‘Wilt thou then obediently keep God’s holy will and commandments, and walk in the same all the days of thy life?’ But they have chosen not to identify these questions as part of a ‘baptismal covenant’. The latest baptismal rites in the Church of England and the Scottish Episcopal Church

include questions nearly identical to those of the Episcopal Church’s Baptismal Covenant, but the creedal questions are separate from the additional questions, and these latter questions are identified as ‘Commitment to Christian Life’ (Scotland) or ‘Commission’ (England).\textsuperscript{16} This is more than a difference in terminology. The churches that do not have a ‘baptismal covenant’ share with the Episcopal Church an understanding that the grace bestowed in baptism bears fruit in a life of Christian witness and service. But in the Episcopal Church the Baptismal Covenant both expresses and symbolizes a radical re-forming of what it means to be Church. Baptism is the foundation of our approach to ministry and church life. Thus the catechism in the 1979 Prayer Book identifies the ministers of the church as ‘lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons’.\textsuperscript{17} Ordained ministries are particular expressions of the more fundamental baptismal gifts of ministry. So, for example, as the Episcopal Church was considering the ordination of women in the 1970s, one argument advanced in favor of this step was ‘ordain women or stop baptizing them’. A similar case is made in favor of the ordination of qualified lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.\textsuperscript{18}

Perhaps in the understandings of baptism that are emerging from our engagement of the Baptismal Covenant, the Episcopal Church has a gift we might offer others in the Anglican Communion. Perhaps this understanding of baptism may enable us to recognize and celebrate more fully the gifts of our baptized sisters and brothers throughout the Anglican Communion. Perhaps that renewed understanding of baptism may enable us to join hands with those sisters and brothers, and together share in the mission of God’s reconciling love for the world.

But appreciating baptism is not sufficient for the task at hand. How does this baptismal emphasis help us consider the proposed Anglican Communion Covenant?


\textsuperscript{17} The Book of Common Prayer (New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1979), p. 855.

\textsuperscript{18} For further discussion, see Podmore, ‘The Baptismal Revolution’. See also Fredrica Harris Thompsett, ‘Coming to our Sacramental Senses: Full Baptismal Participation and Full Inclusion of the People of God’, in ‘We Will, with God’s Help’: Perspectives on Baptism, Sexuality and the Anglican Communion (The Chicago Consultation, 2009), pp. 5–9 (8); available at: http://www.chicagoconsultation.org/site/1/docs/We_Will_With_God_s_Help.pdf (accessed 14 June 2011).
Theological Foundations of the Proposed Covenant

In its second draft, the Covenant Design Group added an introduction that offers a theological foundation for the document. The official commentary on this draft emphasizes the importance of the term ‘covenant’:

The Covenant Design Group was unanimous in believing that we cannot abandon the word and concept of ‘covenant’, and for several reasons: theologically, we believe that it is correct to say that covenant emerges out of communion, and also ‘serves’ communion, both in terms of God’s relations to us, but just as importantly in our mutual relations as reflective of God’s life that we share. It is related, in a concrete way, to the expression of ‘bonds of affection’ in their pneumatic, relational and responsible power. The distinction between ‘covenant’ and other possible concepts (‘concordat’, ‘compact’, etc.) is quite clear in these respects. Finally, the term now has an accepted currency within the Communion that commends its common usage.19

Only minor changes to the introduction were made in subsequent drafts, in response to comments submitted to the design group. Additionally, the design group added to the covenant text a provision explaining that the introduction is not to be considered part of the covenant but is always to be included with the text of the covenant and ‘shall be accorded authority in understanding the purpose of the covenant’.

This introduction sets the proposed covenant in the context of the communion we share through Christ, and more broadly the biblical covenants that furthered our divine calling into communion: the covenants that God made with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David; the new covenant, written on the people’s hearts, that God promised through the prophet Jeremiah; the new covenant established through Jesus’ blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sin. In each of these covenants, God acts first, making promises to a people. Through our communion, we serve the gospel, making manifest to the world the mercy and grace of God, offering to the world God’s reconciling love.

Here, the parallels to the covenant of baptism are obvious. God calls us into communion, just as the covenant of baptism is God’s initiative. The commitments articulated in our Baptismal Covenant flow from the communion that is God’s gift to us.

While the Baptismal Covenant emphasizes commitments lived out in the world, the introduction to the proposed Anglican Covenant stipulates that the gift of communion ‘entails responsibilities for our common life before God’. ‘Covenant’ describes our action as churches with one another. Thus, it says, ‘we covenant together as churches of this Anglican Communion to be faithful to God’s promises through the historic faith we confess, our common worship, our participation in God’s mission, and the way we live together’.

Although set within the framework of God’s promises to us, this covenant is not so much a response to God as it is a set of promises to one another. The emphasis on our commitments to one another is accentuated by the provisions of Section 4, which sets out procedures for accountability to one another and introduces the possibility of ‘relational consequences which flow from an action incompatible with the Covenant’.

Certainly, individuals and churches can enter into covenant with one another. The covenant of marriage comes to mind here. Ecumenical covenants between churches provide an ecclesial example. But as we consider this proposed covenant, we should understand that it is asking us to do something different than the Baptismal Covenant, which articulates our promises in response to God, and different from the biblical covenants with Noah, Abraham, Israel and David.

Conclusion: Assessing the Proposed Covenant

Biblical covenants as well as the covenant of baptism establish a relationship between God and the people of God, in which God takes the initiative and acts out of divine love. The proposed Anglican Covenant, while introduced by this biblical understanding of covenant, focus on the commitments churches make to one another, using the term ‘commit’ to introduce the particular actions they will undertake. The actions enumerated in Section 2 are taken largely from the ‘Marks of Mission’ that arise from work done in the Anglican Consultative Council and echo various ecumenical statements cited in the footnotes. The language is quite similar to the questions of commitment in the Episcopal Church’s Baptismal Covenant. For example, ‘to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God’ and to bring all to repentance and faith’ (Anglican Covenant) compares to ‘Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?’ (Baptismal Covenant); ‘to respond to human need by loving service’ (Marks of Mission and Anglican Covenant) is similar to ‘Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the
dignity of every human being? (Baptismal Covenant). While not every church of the Anglican Communion has formally adopted the Marks of Mission, they have been generally accepted by Anglicans around the world. It seems not a large step to make a formal commitment to these marks of mission.

Section 4, however, is of a different character. Unlike the affirmations and commitments of the first three sections, this section is procedural, setting forth both actions and consequences. Maintenance of our communion will not be a voluntary expression of our mutual responsibility and interdependence but rather a required discipline. The possibility of such discipline imposed by a centralized body of the Anglican Communion introduces a significant change in Anglican ecclesiology.

In the Episcopal Church, the 1979 Prayer Book baptismal rite has fostered an ecclesiological shift in a different direction, toward a stronger baptismal ecclesiology. Lay ministry and leadership shared by laity and clergy are integral to the ethos of the Episcopal Church. The proposed Anglican Covenant says little about the role of laity. The first section acknowledges ‘rigorous study by lay and ordained scholars’ as one means by which Anglicans are better able to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest Scripture. The only other reference to laity is the factual statement in Section 3: ‘The Anglican Consultative Council is comprised of lay, clerical and episcopal representatives from our Churches’. In considering the proposed Anglican Covenant, the Episcopal Church might wonder whether the proposed Anglican Covenant is broad enough to encompass its understanding of authority and its approach to church governance. All churches of the Anglican Communion ought to consider how well the proposed Anglican Covenant honors their particular polities and the diversity of polities throughout the Communion.

The proposed Covenant says little about baptism. Section 1 uses the language of the nineteenth-century Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral to affirm the Apostles’ Creed as the baptismal symbol and baptism as one of the two sacraments ‘ordained by Christ himself’. Section 3 begins with the affirmation ‘that by our participation in Baptism and Eucharist, we are incorporated into the one body of the Church of Jesus Christ, and called by Christ to pursue all things that make for peace and build up our common life’. Is not this the source of our unity as Anglicans? We share a common heritage, tracing our roots in one way or another to the Church of England. Even more important, we share a common baptism, tracing the source of our life to the waters of new birth, and we share communion in Christ’s body and
blood, which nurtures and sustains the people of God in our common life and in our service and witness in the world. Perhaps this sacramental understanding of the Church and the missional commitments that flow from baptism and Eucharist ought to be the foundation of our communion as Anglicans rather than a covenant that relies on centralized structures.