

**A Very Godly Order: A Response to Ephraim Radner's *Making Promises: the Proposed Anglican Covenant in the Life of the Communion***

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*“. . . A very godly order, agreeable to the Word of God and the Primitive Church, very comfortable to all good people desiring to live in Christian conversation, and most profitable to the estate of this realm (Second Act of Uniformity, 1552).”*

Reading the profuse praise Dr Radner leaps on *the Proposed Anglican Covenant*, for a moment I thought I was back in the fourth century peering over Eusebius of Caesarea's shoulders as he penned *The Life of Constantine*. My purpose here is to provide a more sober reading of the *Proposal*. The central questions are: *what is old?* and *what is new?* Upon our response to these questions hangs the future of the Communion at this critical hour.

I begin by summarizing Radner's essay. From the outset, he refers to William Franklin's article "Winds of Change" in *The Tablet*. No, Radner insists, what we have in the Communion, and in the Proposed Covenant, is not a "different kind of Anglicanism for the twenty-first century". His commentary on the *Covenant* comes at the final section. He has two central concerns. First, the content of the *Proposal Covenant* is "not new at all" but rather "who we already are and are called to be more and more". What is this "underlying reality, divine or otherwise is now coming into view, . . . even if somehow always there"? Hence second, Radner argues this underlying reality is "the already of God's 'Yes'": a covenantal relation.

Yet, how does the Communion come to such realization? Here Radner's confidence in the Communion status quo is clear. He hails Canterbury as the prime mover in such awakening. Further, paragraph after paragraph he notes how the Proposed Draft adopts wordings and resolutions reached through conciliar processes, be they Windsor report, Primates' communiqué, Lambeth Conferences, ecumenical dialogue statements and suchlike. Does "this ordering of discernment" through the status quo in our recent histories give expression to the already of God's 'Yes'? Indeed, this is a faith-affirmation. Yet, I would caution to use this as a justification that "all is well" with our present structures and perceptions.

Two points, then, in brief:

*First, recover the godly order.* Indeed, as Radner points point, the Prologue to the *Proposed Covenant* rightly spells out the genius of the Proposal. It is a conservative statement: it does not "introduce some new development into the life of the Communion" "to re-establish trust between the churches of the Communion".

Yet what was the common platform on which the churches of the Communion can reestablish trust? Radner's commentary on Section 2 "The Life We Share" is revealing. He takes the six affirmations there as "an affirmation of the Quadrilateral, elaborated by the addition of an affirmation of communion mission and of the foundational and guiding place of the classical formularies . . .". He then goes to

highlight the place of conciliar resolutions in following sections. Let's pause. If this were a Protestant Covenant, I suppose this would do. Not so for *Anglicans*. Radner missed out the liturgical shape of the Covenant. Right there from the start in "The Life We Share" is the Preamble to the Declaration of Assent in the Ordinal in the (Church of England) Book of Common Prayer. No, a catholic church neither rides on the shoulders of spiritual giants (we believe in the unworthiness of ministers!) or carried by conciliar decisions (councils do err!). Doxology-orthodoxy: Right interpretation of the Word, and right and proper praise underpin Christian ecclesial life.

Section Two of the Proposed Covenant points to an underlying reality deeper than conciliar processes and whatever instruments the Communion has devised over the past sixty years. It is – in the words of the Act of Uniformity, the "very godly order agreeable to the Word of God and the Primitive Church, very comfortable to all good people desiring to live in Christian conversation, and most profitable to the estate of this realm". That is the Book of Common Prayer. It has provided the basis of an ordered life for the faithful day and day and week by week, as they gather to hear God's holy Word. It is the context where the faithful discern their gift and calling. No, dear Dr Radner, you would agree conciliar decisions and committee reports are too highbrow for most of us. They belong to the realms of busy bishop who are too tired to teach. The Covenant is not merely meant for Primates and bishops. It is all the whole *laos* of God.

The present crisis does not happen overnight. It is not merely on sexuality. It got to do with the erosion of that godly order in the "estate of this realm". Many churches across the Communion have thrown away that godly heritage. We the guardians of the flock should have been more vigilant. The "Order of Service" is chopped up into disjointed pieces at the mercy of the private interpretations of worship leaders. The flashes of images from overhead projector and powerpoint take away a discipline of studied dwelling of the holy texts. Section 2 recalls us to that ancient way that once offered us life.

*Second, new wine needs new wineskin.* It is worth quoting Franklin's words in full (though Radner perhaps to save time does not include it in his delivery):

The Tanzania meeting helped create a different kind of Anglicanism of the first decade of the twenty-first century. The developing world is coming to the fore as a mature power within the Communion in this decade. In the last century, the liberals of the North Atlantic would have prevailed with their notion that the Church should be able to accept varying views on a moral issue like homosexuality. But this position lost out in Tanzania. The international "instruments of Communion", like the primates, have won the right to intervene in national provinces."<sup>1</sup>

O'Donovan appeals to the Communion that we need to understand the homosexuals on their own terms rather than through the liberal interpretative lens.<sup>2</sup> This assessment also applies to the Global South. I asked elsewhere: How much is the Global South worth?: a market, sources for raw material, or pawns in war theaters? Not long ago, when seminarians from the Global South come to the West for theological education, they need to contend with English and their lack of

philosophical training. It is difficult to understand any theological book without a prior education in the Enlightenment.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps what is new in the twenty-first century is that those in the West would find themselves increasingly out of place without knowledge of the present socio-political and lingual-cultural contexts in the wider world. Science and democracy (we can produce better, our political system makes more money) – the twin pillars in Western supremacy – no longer apply in this rapidly changing and complicated world. I do not suppose for a moment the ailing instruments and Communion commissions can help us face today's world. Is the Communion ready to learn? Does not the Communion need to put in place a listening and learning process for the Global South, and break out of the quadrant-model?

This brings to my finishing remark. Dr Radner suggests an earlier Global South draft was the basis of the Proposed Covenant. He reveals what the Commission has to write “from scratch” is Section 6 (where items 4 to 6 involve disciplinary measures). Was that an oversight on the part of the Global South? Or are Global South churches more in touch with the reality of God's “yes”? It is the *faith* expressed in a common order that binds us all in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic *ecclesial* community. Decisions on the *ecclesiastical order* are best left to Primates and bishops. Their provisions are necessary; but they are at best like the gracious provision of fig leaves for those who live in the East of Eden to hide their shame. Deeper and wider than we imagine are God's love for the whole People of God. To deeper wrestling with our souls and wider fellowship with all his saints he has called us, that we may together enter his rest. The surprisingly unpolemical draft from the Global South is a concrete gesture for restoring trust.

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<sup>1</sup> R Williams Franklin, “Winds of Change”, *The Tablet*, 24 February 2007, <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/articles/9399/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Good News for Gay Christians”, Fulcrum, <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/page.cfm?ID=179>.

<sup>3</sup> I was fortunate thirty years ago to have a godly theology professor who suggested me to read Athanasius rather than modern theologies!