

Summary of the Biblical Foundations of Covenant
Diocese of West Texas Pre-Council Meetings

January-February, 2010

Just as covenant is a dominant theme in Scripture, so too is it a pervasive theme woven into our worship. In the Eucharist, we are recalled continually to the covenant we have in Christ, as in the Words of Institution from the Last Supper we are invited to drink "the blood of the New Covenant." The Baptismal Covenant and the "bond and covenant of marriage" explicitly reference the New Covenant and our responsibilities to God and one another - and to those outside the Church.

The proposed Anglican Communion Covenant has roots that pass through the emergence of Anglicanism in the 16th C. as a distinct way of being Christian and reach back to the covenant God made with Abraham, beginning in Genesis 12.

The notion of covenant permeates the Bible. Our God is a covenanting God. "Testament" and "covenant" are interchangeable terms, so that the Bible itself is divided into the story of the Old Covenant beginning with Abraham and the New Covenant inaugurated and embodied by Jesus.

Two kinds of covenant appear in the Bible. One is a mutual agreement between equals (more-or-less). The other is offered or imposed by a greater power upon a lesser power. The stronger party expects loyalty and obligates itself to protect and care for the weaker party. The great majority of covenant talk in Scripture concerns this second type.

Covenant as used in the Bible means "a bond entered into voluntarily by two parties by which each pledges to do something for the other" (*Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*) or "a formal agreement between two parties, with each assuming some obligation." (*Harper-Collins Bible Dictionary*) A contract and a covenant are not the same thing. In a contract, all that matters is what is on the page; anything not written down is of no

concern to the contracting parties. A covenant is relational. The written document describes the nature of the relationship and responsibilities each has for the other, and it declares what's necessary for life together.

Though there are numerous covenants in the Old Testament, three dominate Jewish thought and practice. First, the covenant God makes with Abraham, in which God promises him his descendants will be more numerous than the stars in the sky and he will father a great nation (Israel). Second, the Sinai Covenant which God establishes after the Hebrews are led by Moses out of slavery in Egypt. In the giving of the Law, the Hebrews receive their identity as God's chosen people and are bound to him. And third, the covenant between God and David, in which God chooses young David and promises that his Spirit will rest upon him and he will be a great king with an enduring dynasty.

Characteristics of these covenants include: (1) God is faithful to the covenant; (2) the covenants do not fully define the relationship established by them, so that when the covenant is broken it is not abolished; (3) the covenant gives the people identity and purpose; (4) the covenant is between God and people, but also between one another as people of God; (5) breaking the covenant has consequences; (6) the covenant also describes the relationship between God's people and those who are not of the covenant; (7) God's loving-kindness is not only for the covenant people, they are to be the means by which all people are restored to God; and (8) God keeps covenant passionately, not passively.

For the early Church, there was no discontinuity between the Old and New Covenants. Jesus doesn't replace the Old Covenant; he fulfills it and embodies it. Each of the three major covenants culminate in the Person of Jesus: a new nation of the children of God (Abraham), the Law (Sinai), and the awaited Messiah who will save his people (David). The first Christians understood Jesus' death as the beginning of the New Covenant and saw themselves as members of it. In the New Covenant, God not only calls people

into relationship with himself, but acts decisively in Christ's death and resurrection, and in the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and takes responsibility for his people's faithfulness to the relationship.

The New Testament expresses this New Covenant in various ways: It is not in a written code, but in the Spirit; a Christian's righteousness or faithfulness is made possible by the indwelling of Christ whose faithfulness to his Father is now lived out through believers; life in the new covenant is an abiding in Christ in which he also abides in the believers, binding them to one another and enabling them to bear the fruits of the Kingdom.

As people of the New Covenant we find our identity and purpose in Christ and are called to a life of communion, fellowship, holiness, service and love. We are bound to Christ and one another and we are outward bound to love and serve the world which God loves so much that he sent his only Son.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

- 1) What are the promises for us in the covenants described in Holy Scripture and in worship? What are the challenges?
- 2) Think ahead to tomorrow. What might be different if you were to live the day fully aware of God's covenant with you?

Some Further Reading

The Epistle to the Hebrews (esp. chs. 7-10) (Comparison of Old and New Covenants) Genesis 12-15 (the covenant with Abraham)
Exodus 19-34 (the covenant at Sinai)
II Samuel 2-7 (the covenant with David)
Deuteronomy 5-7; Joshua 24; Psalm 89
Isaiah 42-44, 49, 55-56, 60-62; Jeremiah 31-33; Hosea 6-11
Luke 1:67-79; Matthew 26:20-29 & Mark 14:22-25 & Luke 22:14-20; Acts 3;
Galatians 3-4; Ephesians 2; II Corinthians 3
The Great Vigil of Easter, BCP, pp. 285-295 (esp. the Scripture readings appointed)