

Soon after its formation in February 1993 Reform wished to make plain what its Council believed. It did so by issuing the Reform covenant under the title "A Covenant for the evangelisation of England through the Church of England". Now that membership is open to churches as well as individuals it was thought helpful to explain more fully what this covenant is and why we have one.

A covenant is basically a promise or pledge between two parties. In the Bible the word "covenant" usually refers to a promise in which the two parties are God and his people. However the Reform covenant is a pledge of commitment between people - between those who subscribe to it. The title indicates that the purpose of this bond of commitment is to aid the bringing of the gospel to the people of England. It also makes clear that those who subscribe to it wish to do so through the denominational structures of the Church of England. It is therefore expected to be used mainly by Church of England congregations, although fellowship with other evangelical Christians in gospel work is always welcome.

## Why have a Covenant?

The Reform covenant bears witness to the beliefs of those who subscribe to it. Christians have always found it necessary to speak of what they believe in such a way. Statements of what Christians believe assist discernment between truth and error. This is why the apostle John says: *This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God (1 John 4:2-3).*

In later centuries this necessity is seen in the Creeds, the confessions of faith from the time of the Reformation (including the Church of England's [39 Articles](#)), and the statements of belief used by student and mission organisations. That does not mean that anyone is made a Christian by subscribing to such a statement of belief, but no Christian can ignore the need to speak clearly and graciously of what he believes.

In recent years there has been a regrettable trend to speak of doctrine dividing but the Spirit uniting. That is a distinction the first Christians would have found very odd. They knew that God was and is a speaking God. They knew that God uses the Spirit inspired Scriptures to address,

teach and guide believers in every generation. They knew too that God had created human beings in His image and with the faculty of communication through words. Words of truth were important for God in order to accomplish his purposes for the world. They continue to be important for us today (which is why technical words with precise meanings are used in the Reform covenant). Words of truth and statements of what we believe, when used aright, will support the cause of the gospel and bring glory to Almighty God. That is why Reform has a covenant.

Another unfortunate distinction that is commonly found amongst Christians is the idea that the gospel can be distinguished from the teaching (or doctrine) of the whole Bible. Some congregations and Christians long to get on with the work of the gospel and yet mistakenly think they can do so without bearing witness to the whole counsel of God. Matters of sexual morality are a case in point. If we are unwilling to spell out what the Bible teaches in this area then our attempts to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ will become increasingly irrelevant. If we cannot indicate to our generation where we rebel against God's rule then we will be unable to convince our generation that we need a Saviour. That is why Reform has a covenant.

## The doctrine of the Church of England

The introduction to the Reform covenant reminds us of the official position of the Church of England as set out in Canon A5:

*The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the Holy Scriptures, and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures. In particular such doctrine is to be found in the 39 Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal.*

The Canons of the Church of England are the rules which govern the Church's life. Canon A5 is therefore telling us in a broad way what the Church of England teaches. The Canons are intended to ensure that all Christians who belong to the Church of England (from the pew to Lambeth Palace) live in a way which pleases God. The fact that Canon A5 makes reference to doctrine bears witness to the conviction that sound and biblical doctrine produces healthy Christianity and behaviour which pleases God (note the charge to Timothy by Paul: "Watch your life and doctrine closely" (1 Tim 4:16)).

Many would seek to define what an Anglican is in other ways - perhaps by the presence of bishops or simply by expressing attachment to its more trivial features such as the parish system - but here we are given a clear expression of the reality that doctrine matters. An Anglican needs to be defined above all by what he believes.

Canon A5 makes it clear that the Bible is the supreme source for doctrine. It acknowledges the value of tradition and the wisdom of Christians down the centuries but will only allow such tradition and wisdom to have authority if they can be shown to agree with what the Bible teaches. The Bible is the ultimate authority. The ancient Fathers are those leaders and teachers in the first few centuries of the Church's existence who did so much to define apostolic teaching in the face of pagan and Jewish errors. The Councils of the Church refer in particular to gatherings of Church leaders in the first few centuries which met to settle disputed questions. For example the Council of Nicea in the year 325 AD largely produced what is known today as the Nicene Creed. These Councils were especially important in defining the nature of God and Jesus Christ - definitions which are increasingly important today as many turn back to the paganism of New Age type religions.

Canon A5 also refers to documents that are associated with the Church of England in particular and that express teaching which is biblical. All three of these documents (the 39 Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal) are to be found in what is commonly known as the BCP or old prayer book.

If you look at the old prayer book you will find the 39 Articles printed at the back. These were drawn up in the mid 16th century to help Christians guard against the errors of the Roman Catholic Church on the one hand and the errors of spiritual enthusiasts called Anabaptists on the other. Although other dangerous errors have appeared in the centuries since then, they are still very important for us today. A modern translation of the 39 Articles can be found alongside the old in "An English Prayer Book" published by Oxford University Press.

At the beginning of the old prayer book you will find church services such as morning and evening prayer and the Lord's Supper. It is these services which are meant by the Book of Common Prayer. It is important to remember that what we say in our church services is actually a statement of what we believe. The martyred Archbishop Cranmer was largely

responsible for these services. The result of his work in the Communion service has been called the finest liturgical (church service) expression of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Most modern Church of England prayer books are nothing like as clear in this matter.

The Ordinal is the section within the old prayer book which is to be found between the two sections already mentioned. It is called the Ordinal because it lays out the way in which church leaders are to be ordained or set apart for the work of shepherding God's people. It is particularly important because it reminds us of the priorities which clergy and bishops are to have in their work. All clergy (including bishops) promise for example "to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrine contrary to God's Word". They are given Bibles to show that the teaching of God's Word is to be the priority characteristic of Church of England leaders.

## Specifically we lay emphasis on the following:

Since the Church of England was reformed 450 years ago further problems have arisen to trouble God's people and to destroy the faith of some (2 Tim 2:18). This has led those who take the Bible as their supreme authority (in accordance with Canon A5) to stress certain extra points which the Bible teaches. The Reform Covenant contains eight such further points.

(1) The triune personhood of God as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and the historical incarnation of the Son of God through the Virgin Mary.

This point teaches what is commonly known as the Trinity. Unitarians and Jehovah's Witnesses officially do not believe in the Trinity. However teaching on the Trinity can be undermined even from within Trinitarian denominations such as the Church of England. Some who speak of themselves as Christians refuse to use the terms "Father" and "Son" of the first two persons of the Godhead.

However this point also stresses something called the "historical incarnation". Incarnation refers to the way in which Jesus became flesh, or became a real human being. The emphasis on the historical is necessary in order to stress that this was a real event in history and not a myth. The means of this incarnation is indicated as being "through the Virgin Mary" in order to counter other accounts of Jesus' origin

which may in turn deny the biblical teaching on who he is.

(2) The substitutionary sin-bearing death, bodily resurrection, present heavenly reign, and future return to judgement of Jesus Christ the incarnate Son.

Here we are given the main events, past, present and future, of Jesus' work. His death on a cross was not like that of the criminals on either side of him. He died as a substitute for others - that is in the place they deserved to have. Without Jesus God's people deserve death. The particular aspect of his substitutionary death is indicated by the fact that it was sin-bearing. This reminds us that the wages of sin is death ((Rom 6:23). To grasp the full significance of Jesus' death we need to study the Old Testament system of atoning sacrifices as this gives the background understanding for it.

After his death Jesus rose from the dead. The disciples encountered the risen Lord Jesus and recognised him as such. It is important to stress that Jesus' resurrection was a bodily one because some speak of these disciples as having visions or experiences of the risen Jesus while denying he had a real body. In Luke 24:41-43 it is stressed that the risen Jesus ate some fish. This is probably recorded so as to make precisely this point. The bodily resurrection of Jesus is important because it is the firstfruits of an entirely new creation (see Rev 21:1) in which Christians themselves will be given new bodies. To deny Jesus' bodily resurrection is to deny this future reality.

The phrase "present heavenly reign" indicates the location of Jesus now. He is in heaven, that is in the presence of God. And Jesus is not merely an angel or some other heavenly being there. Jesus is reigning in heaven. He is after all the Christ, God's Anointed one, or chosen King. Jesus is the one through whom God has chosen to rule the world and His people.

That rule of Jesus will become a universal reality when his kingdom is fully present. This will occur when Jesus returns to this world. That return will be to establish the kingdom of God in the renewed creation that will last for ever and ever, but it will inevitably involve judgement for all. Paul reminds us that we are all accountable to God's chosen King by saying in Acts 17:31 God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.

(3) The universality of sin, the present justification of sinners by grace

through faith in Christ alone, and their supernatural regeneration and new life through the Holy Spirit.

Here the seriousness of the problem with sin in human beings is stressed. That sin is universal reminds us that there is no one who is not deeply affected by it and that all areas of our existence are touched by it. In fact the problem is so serious that God's provision of Jesus Christ is the only answer.

Justification is a word that comes from the law courts. To be justified is to be declared not guilty. This point within the covenant is emphasising that the only way in which anyone can be declared not guilty of sinful rebellion against God is by relying on Christ. Note that it is Christ alone - not Christ plus something else (such as churchgoing, being baptised, or a spiritual experience). The reality that this verdict of not guilty is one which can only come about through relying on Jesus Christ is indicated by the word "grace". That reminds us that our justification comes purely from God's goodness and not from ourselves in any way. The word "faith" describes the means by which the verdict of not guilty (based on Christ dying in our place) can be personally ours. The fact that the justification is present tells us that the right response to God's gift of Jesus now, will give us the verdict of not guilty now. One of the many blessings of the Christian good news is that we can be certain of our eternal salvation now.

When any person responds with faith to the grace of God in Jesus Christ then God promises he will be given "supernatural regeneration and new life through the Holy Spirit". Regeneration is elsewhere called the new birth or being born again. It is a vivid picture of the radical change that turning to Christ brings about. It is not a psychological change but a real change in our nature. We are given a new life. The means by which God brings this real change about is the Holy Spirit who is promised to all who respond to the gospel (see Acts 2:38). One description of that new life in the Spirit is that of "keeping in step with the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25)

(4) The calling of the Church and of all Christian people to a life of holiness and prayer according to the Scriptures.

God changes people through the gospel for a purpose. Both the Church as the community of believers and individual Christians are required by God to live a life that pleases and honours him. This is what we are made for and it is in doing this that we find our true happiness. Key

features of such a life are holiness and prayer. The calling to be holy is a calling to behave in a way which is in line with the character of God. That will necessarily involve breaking with a world that is in rebellion against God. Prayer expresses our dependence upon God. If we neglect prayer we are in practice saying we are able to please God without God's help. It needs to be stressed that this holiness and prayer is to be defined and shaped by the teaching of the Bible. It is all too easy to define holiness and prayer in a way which simply suits us in order to avoid the cost and challenge of the Christian life.

(5) The primacy of evangelism and nurture in each local church's task of setting forth the kingdom of God.

Many Christian congregations can lose sight of their priorities and purpose in God's plan. God is working towards the establishment of the rule of Christ. He desires that many people from all nations should one day live in the eternal kingdom of God. Jesus therefore gave his followers a job to do in Matt 28:19-20. That task is to make new disciples and teach them to live a life of obedience to God. This is what is covered by the phrase "evangelism and nurture". It is an extraordinary privilege that local groups of Christians are given this responsibility by God in order to accomplish his eternal plan. We should never neglect it.

(6) The significance of personal present repentance and faith as determining our eternal destiny.

This point underlines the fact that it is our response in this life to the gospel command "repent and believe" which sets our eternal future (heaven or hell). There are no second chances after death and any teaching which encourages us to expect such chances for ourselves or for those we love is untrue to the Bible. There is also a stress here on the fact that our response to the gospel now in this life has to be a personal one. We cannot rely on other people (parents or friends who are Christians) to do this for us. Associating with other Christians cannot save us. Repentance and faith are what Jesus himself preached (see Mark 1:15). Repentance indicates a change in direction away from pleasing ourselves to pleasing God. It is also an ongoing activity of the Christian. Faith refers to believing the Christian gospel, which is above all about Jesus Christ. Faith is a commitment to following Jesus for who he is and what he has done for us.

(7) The finality of God's revelation in Jesus Christ and the uniqueness of his ministry as our prophet, priest and king, and the only Saviour of sinners.

Here we are reminded that with Jesus we reach the end of God's unveiling of his purposes and plans. We must not expect any further unveiling since God's work for the world is complete in Jesus. (Heb 1:1-2 shows how the speaking of God to his creation is completed by the coming of His Son Jesus. We now live in the "last days" - a phrase which expresses the temporary nature of our current existence and the expectation that the eternal kingdom of God will soon be a reality. This point also stresses that what Jesus has done is unique - no one else will ever do what he did. The Bible is explicit that he is the only way in which sinners can be saved and find a place in God's kingdom. We must not think that there are others ways in which we can be saved (for example through other religions).

The work of Jesus is summed up by saying that he is the prophet, priest and king of God's people. He is the supreme prophet expected by Moses (Deut 18:18) who delivers God's final message. He is the last High Priest who has provided by his death a completely effective sacrifice which means that all other attempts at offering sacrifice for sin are unnecessary and blasphemous (see (Heb 10:11-12). He is the king in that he is the descendant of King David promised by God who would perfectly rule God's people for ever. The word Christ basically means king.

(8) The infallibility and supreme authority of "God's Word written" and its clarity and sufficiency for the resolving of disputes about Christian faith and life. (See Article 20)

Article 20 here refers to the [39 Articles](#) mentioned earlier which are part of what the Church of England officially believes. Article 20 contains the phrase "God's Word written" which is an excellent way of describing what the Bible is. (2 Pet 1:21 reminds us that prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. The Bible came about through God putting his words into the mouths of human beings under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As these words were written down they came to form the books of the Bible which with the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ himself is now complete and closed.

The use of the word "infallibility" is intended to emphasise the complete

reliability of the Bible. In everything that it is seeking to say it will not err or make a mistake. This infallibility comes from the fact that God through the Holy Spirit is the ultimate author of the Bible. The Bible has supreme authority in the sense that is mentioned in Canon A5. There are other sources of authority in Christianity which we must respect (tradition, church leaders etc.) but in the end we must allow what the Bible itself says to determine what we do.

The covenant also stresses here the Bible's clarity and sufficiency. We need to remember that the Bible is clear. God intends that we should be able to grasp the basic message which he speaks to us. He is not in the business of making it difficult for us to understand him and what he wants us to do. That does not mean that we know everything about God or that there are not bits of the Bible which require hard work to grasp what they are saying, but the overall plan of God and the role of Jesus Christ can be readily understood. Saying that the Bible is sufficient means that it gives us all the guidance that we need. This warns us against looking elsewhere for guidance and help because we think God has not provided enough in the Bible. For example people might turn to visions or prophetic words to help them out. If people think that the Bible is not sufficient for them then it is likely that they have misunderstood the message and purpose of the Bible, as well as the type of guidance God provides. The clarity and sufficiency of the Bible are of course particularly important when it comes to handling practical issues and questions which arise from ordinary church life.

## Our understanding of God's way of life for his people includes:

In this section the Reform covenant is mainly addressing evangelicals within the Church of England today, although some of these points have a more general application. The points here are tackling controversial issues within the life of the Church of England today, ones which Reform believes bring grave danger to the life and witness of God's people in its various congregations.

(a) The special teaching responsibility of ordained leaders within the every-member ministry of the body of Christ, and the need to provide for its continuance.

It has already been stated when referring to the Ordinal that the

historic belief of the Church of England is that those who lead congregations must make teaching the Word of God their chief task. In some circles the biblical teaching on every-member ministry has been misunderstood so as to threaten this priority. When Paul teaches (1 Cor 12) that God gives different gifts to people within Christian congregations (the body of Christ) so that they may work together for God's glory and the good of his people, he does not mean that everyone is equipped to teach the word of God. That job is one which only some are called to do, and it is one by which God provides the lead and direction for his people. This task must not be devalued or undertaken by those who are not willing to put in hard work at it. The task of teaching is so important for the spiritual health of God's people that Reform here expresses its commitment to making sure that high quality candidates are encouraged to consider it and that they are properly trained to do it. Such a commitment also involves a determination to remove any obstacles to the use of such properly trained people in this work.

(b) The unique value of women's ministry in the local congregation but also the divine order of male headship, which makes the headship of women as priests in charge, incumbents, dignitaries and bishops inappropriate.

The issue of the ordination of women has meant that the ministry of women has had to be rethought in recent years. That is no bad thing as many features and restrictions within women's ministry in the past may have been unbiblical.

Nevertheless this point in the covenant expresses the conviction that the Bible does not allow women to be in charge of Christian congregations (1 Tim 2:11-14 etc). This is what is meant by the term "headship". This principle is expressed here in terms of the practical titles for such jobs that exist within the Church of England. Dignitaries refers to appointments as archdeacons, deans etc. However Reform believes there is still much to be done in terms of encouraging women into forms of ministry (both full time and part time) which provide contributions to the life and witness of a congregation that cannot be given by men.

(c) The vital importance of monogamous life-long marriage for the care and nurture of children, and the well being of human society.

Everyone begins life as a child. Families are where children train to be

adults by learning how to relate to other people. Stability and security in family life is vital for healthy relationships. Thus the well being of families is vital for the well being of human society as a whole. God's ideal pattern for human families is seen in the way he has created us male and female and that a partnership between male and female is the context in which children are born. The ideal of monogamous life-long marriage reflects this. Monogamous means having a single spouse (bigamy for example is having two spouses simultaneously). It is this exclusive commitment between a man and a woman which is commanded by God and which provides the security and stability we all need as human beings. There is now ample statistical evidence to show that this is indeed what works best. Of course where tragedy strikes and the ideal of monogamous life-long marriage is unable to occur we must remember that God who is sovereign can still bring blessing to the people involved. However the fact that God by his grace can bring such blessing out of tragedy should not be used as an excuse to avoid the challenge to live according to God's ways.

(d) The rightness of sexual intercourse in heterosexual marriage, and the wrongness of such activity both outside it and in all its homosexual forms. In the face of enormous confusion today the biblical pattern for sexual activity must be spelt out. Both fornication (sex before marriage) and adultery (sex outside marriage) are condemned as sinful heterosexual behaviour in the Bible. Homosexual behaviour (which can appear in a variety of ways) is also condemned as sinful. This part of the covenant is not singling out sexual behaviour as the worst form of sinfulness, it is rather that this is the area where the Bible's authority and teaching is so often denied today. And of course when we find our behaviour is condemned as sinful by the Bible, in whatever area, we are encouraged to seek forgiveness through the gospel of Jesus Christ and to lead a new life in him.

(e) The urgent need for decentralisation at national, diocesan and deanery level, and the need radically to reform the present shape of episcopacy and pastoral discipline, to enable local churches to evangelise more effectively.

Sometimes the organisational structures which a denomination creates develop in a way which hinders the work of evangelism in the local church. This point expresses the conviction that certain features of the Church of England at the present time are doing exactly that. While

there are activities which are appropriately conducted at national, diocesan and deanery level, there has been a tendency for these units to take on tasks and responsibilities which are best left to the local congregation. Our structures are top heavy and need decentralisation. For example there are now more bishops than 40 years ago but there are far fewer clergy. Matters such as finance, the distribution of clergy and other resources have become too remote from the people who know best how to use these resources to God's glory. The present way of exercising the office of bishop has many unbiblical and ungodly features. The model of episcopacy which is taken for granted today can and should be reformed. For example bishops would benefit enormously from closer ties with a local congregation. They need to be freed from their administrative burdens in order to teach the Word of God. A further area ripe for reform and renewal is that of pastoral discipline. Pastoral discipline involves applying New Testament penalties to those who claim to be Christian and yet engage in ungodly behaviour. Such discipline is to be applied in a spirit of love for the welfare of the Christian community as a whole. It is particularly important for those in leadership positions to be disciplined where necessary, since they are to be above reproach (1 Tim 3:2) and examples to the flock (1 Pet 5:3). This pastoral discipline is not applied today in a consistent and biblical fashion.

## Conclusion

Reform hopes that its covenant will indeed help congregations and church leaders to "uphold, defend and spread the gospel of Jesus Christ". The Council hopes that it will not only provide direction and guidance over historic matters of contention, but that it will also provide such direction in matters which cause much current confusion. We hope that it will be used to strengthen the confidence and faith of Christians today. This booklet is intended to help us reach the whole measure of the fulness of Christ (Eph. 4:13).