

God's covenant: What it means to be church

by [Edwin Chr. van Driel](#) in the [January 9, 2007](#) issue

The idea of “covenant” comes up frequently in proposed solutions to mainline crises. Before writing its final report, the PCUSA Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church drew up a covenant of prayer, worship and careful listening. Likewise, the archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has proposed that the conservative side of the Anglican Communion—the African churches, the Church of England and conservative dioceses within the Episcopal Church—make a covenant with each another as a core group of the Anglican Communion that will commit themselves to mutual consultation and agreement.

A second group of more liberal churches, with most of the Episcopal Church among them, would be affiliated with the core group, but these churches would also be free to go their own way. Both conservative and liberal Episcopalians have responded favorably to this idea: the conservatives feel validated and protected, while the liberals feel free to move on with projects that are important to them. As a liberal priest said: “If you don’t want to sit at this table, it’s better to go and sit at a table further down.”

Using the concept of covenant to hold a divided church together is a tried and tested method. I grew up in the Netherlands Reformed Church, which, like many European national churches, is theologically diverse. But the idea of covenant is central to the church’s identity: both liberals and conservatives within the church believe that they are members of the same church not because of any choice they made, but because God made a covenant with all of them in baptism.

What is theologically problematic about the archbishop’s proposal, by contrast, is that “covenant” and the church constituted by it are conceptualized as human ideas. He and others in the mainline are suggesting that the covenant is an agreement made between humans who think alike; and that once made, the covenant forms the basis of their church and their community. But when scripture talks about

covenant, something completely different emerges. Covenant, it turns out, is not an agreement between human beings after all, but a relationship initiated by God and sealed in baptism. In covenanting with human beings, God reaches out to them and says: “You are mine.”

It is God’s covenant that forms the basis of the church. Yes, those of us within the church will at some point find ourselves in disagreement. But our disagreements do not give us the right to suggest that one of us should leave the covenant—because it is *God’s* covenant, not ours. Nor do our disagreements give me the right to suggest that you should move to a table “further down”—because it is not my table you are invited to, but *God’s* table.

I’m not suggesting that the current disputes and differences in the churches are not serious, or that they do not reflect real and important theological differences. Still, we are not invited to the covenant or the table on the basis of our theology; we were invited to the covenant long before we even had a theology. We are invited to the covenant because of grace.

Some will say that this approach to church and covenant sacrifices truth for unity. I would suggest that we take a lesson from the history of the Netherlands Reformed Church. In the 19th century, some of its ministers denied the resurrection or the divinity of Christ; another minister famously claimed to be a follower of Buddha. The leadership of the church refused to uphold the church’s confessional standards. As a result, the majority of the church seemed to have lost its theological identity.

In this situation the orthodox minority found itself divided into two camps on how to respond. One camp thought the church’s theological character should be restored by its members appealing to the church’s courts and synod. If this did not help, the members would leave the church. This became known as the *juridical way*. For several decades the juridical camp made its appeals, and when these were unsuccessful, members of the dissenting group left and formed the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (RCN). Meanwhile, the other minority group in the NRC followed the *medical way*: its members believed that as long as one is not prevented from preaching the gospel, one should never leave the church. They believed that the medicine of the gospel itself can heal a sick church, and although they were weakened by the loss of orthodox allies, members of this group continued to focus on preaching the gospel.

The result seemed predictable. The RCN would become a conservative bulwark, its identity firmly protected by its juridical structure. The NRC would grow more and more liberal, with a slim and powerless conservative minority. But things turned out differently. One hundred years later the RCN found itself at the far left of the theological spectrum, and its international daughter churches, including the Christian Reformed Church in the U.S.A., declared themselves in impaired communion with their mother church. Meanwhile, in the 1930s and 1940s a spirit of renewal began to stir in the NRC. Liberals, middle-of-the-roaders and conservatives became discontented with the perceived theological wishy-washiness of the church.

None of these groups gave up its particular approach to the gospel, but all realized that a church which does not firmly confess its obedience to the gospel of Christ is null and void. In 1950 an overwhelming majority in the synod accepted a new, Christ-centered church order and restored the church's ties to its confessional documents. The preaching of the gospel—and only the preaching—had healed the church.

If this is what it means to be church, being church will never be easy. We find ourselves joined together with people we disagree with, people we do not necessarily like. But that is exactly what God's covenant is all about: God reaches out to people who are not likable—people who are sinners. It is only because God graciously embraces these imperfect human beings that any of us have a chance to be included in God's covenant.

If this is what it means to be church, then being church is also profoundly countercultural. One reason why the Episcopalian left and right so easily embrace Archbishop Williams's ideas may be that those ideas perfectly match the American emphasis on freedom and choice. If there is any place for the church to be countercultural, however, it is in situations in which we are called to remember our original covenant.

"You did not choose me but I chose you" (John 15:16). As a church we are called, formed, judged and renewed not by our own choices, but only by God.