

THE COVENANT JOURNAL

A COMMENTARY ON THE CHURCH • NUMBER 26, SEPTEMBER, 2007



The Baptismal Covenant

Celebrant Do you believe in God the Father?

People I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

Celebrant Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

People I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried
He descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again.
He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Celebrant Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?

People I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.

Celebrant Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship,
in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent
and return to the Lord.

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

People I will, with God's help.

THE COVENANT JOURNAL is an alternative and independent journal of opinion unofficially published within the Episcopal Church and grounded editorially in the Baptismal Covenant (BCP pp 304f).

It is an occasional paper written primarily to encourage leadership and collegiality among all four orders of ministry — lay persons, deacons, presbyters, and bishops — by promoting charitable, yet timely and vigorous discourse through articles and letters about church agenda and life, about church councils and moral choice, and about the way the church makes and implements decisions.

May it provide a safe place, a place where truth can be told, a place where we can trust one another.

This non-profit enterprise is sustained entirely by the gifts of those who want to promote an alternative church press. We invite your contributions of thoughtful articles, letters, and money to —

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A covenant is a relationship initiated by God, to which a body of people responds in faith. (BCP p 846)

Poetry

“When power leads us to arrogance, poetry reminds us of our limitations. When power narrows the area of our concern, poetry reminds us of the richness and diversity of our existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses.”

Some years ago when we first quoted these words of John F Kennedy in this journal, we had little notion that one day we’d devote an entire issue to poetry. He had in mind then the state, but the notion sounded altogether as appropriate for the church. The Baptismal Covenant has been and continues to be this journal’s basic editorial policy. And now that we think about it, it is a kind of poetry in itself, a metaphorical shaping and way of imagining the Christian life, not unlike the parables, the poetry of Jesus, were for him.

It should be no surprise that the fundamentalist/literalist mindset now insinuating itself into the Anglican Communion’s churches would want to change our traditional biblical theology-of-analogy into one ponderous confession qua covenant all the better to manipulate. This move is, indeed, as Kennedy wrote, a move for power which leads to arrogance, narrows our vision, and corrupts our politics and mission.

Rob Cogswell’s deeply spiritual reflections recall for us how poetry, especially the poetry of our Baptismal Covenant, can remind us of our limitations together with the richness and diversity of our existence all the while cleansing us as perhaps no fuller on earth can do.

The Mail

The Revd Jim Hall Diocese of Tennessee I’ve never seen a subscription price, but I hope this (check) will help. (Ed. *Immensely, thank you.*)

Rob Cogswell Diocese of Texas I was especially pleased to see this time Shan Overton’s poem, “An Old Flame,” which sets standard to which I can aspire (TCJ25). I’m not much good at understatement, but that’s what good poetry requires, subtlety. Shan achieves it, and this poem is better than any of mine.

The Revd Cynthia Seeliger Dio of Tennessee We would like to request that the below address be completely removed from you (sic) mailing list. (Ed. *The address: St Paul Church, Murfreesboro, TN*)

*I believe in God
the Father Almighty,
creator of heaven
and earth.*

Creativity

I make no weak choice
to say that I am made.
I know what a father should be.
so I make God a father,
and at the same time,
for God's sake,
Almighty.
On earth my father
may be an abusive fool,
a mean and thoughtless monster,
weak, or merely decent.
To the first and last Maker I attribute
the ponderous good of good parenthood.
In this way and others,
from my emptiness of comprehension,
I simplify the universal creator.
Shamelessly, I am happy
to have a friendly companion,
an experienced craftsman,
to collaborate in my creative work.

*I believe in Jesus Christ,
his only Son, our Lord.*

Children of God

If you were not my brother, Jesus,
how could you understand me
when my final earthly vision
turns out to be a heavy boot
descending like a dull blade on my throat.
You know what you need to know
because you were crucified
never knowing your own divinity.
You had to be as hopeless as I am,
or you wouldn't understand me at all.
Along with your body, your hope
hung bloodless and dead
on the cross of human reality
just as mine does.
Strong, alive and loving,
you wrap your hands under my armpits
and pick me up with the strength possessed
only by one who survives humiliation
and returns to make right
all these wrongs.

*I believe in the Holy
Spirit.*

A Gentle Wind

Even if Christianity
had never thrown before us
that peace-loving bird
that angry flame
that fierce wind
to consume completely
the harm we always do,
even then I would hold
this strong breath of mystery
as close as my skin,
as warm as my blood,
for this spirit supplies
the knowledge we need
to tidy up our mess
and leave it not nearly
so shallow in kindness.
I find myself powerless
to become beneficial.
Sometimes I look back
on what has been done
and wonder with gratitude,
Who did that?

*Will you continue
in the apostles' teaching
and fellowship,
in the breaking of bread,
and in the prayers?*

Fidelity

Asked to be constant
I hesitate as wisdom dictates
because this promise could impact
all remaining details in my life.
Commonly, in weddings,
at the moment of the vow,
someone faints, and I know why.
Asked now for a commitment
to that ancient marriage
I could not honestly assent
except that I love beyond reason
the one for whom I make this pledge.
His personal friends,
scatterbrained and flighty,
resolved to mightily wield
imagination to support
the unreasonable assertion
that an executed criminal
comes closer than anyone
before or since
to the spirit of God.
When I see what he did
and what he does,
I have no more choice than they did.
I will. I do.

*Will you persevere
in resisting evil,
and whenever you fall
into sin, repent
and return to the Lord?*

Your Sins Are Forgiven

I wonder whether Jesus worried
about evil as much as we do.
He and Bob Marley both told us
not to worry at all.
Real sin is whatever
takes my mind off God.
At every opportunity
I confess my heart out
about the other, unimportant sin,
and despite ample portions
of ecclesiastical forgiveness
I still drag a heavy bag
of guilt along behind me.
What if I concentrated
on some tiny virtue hidden
under the ways I misuse my time?
I might find within
my own miniature goodness
a seed trying to sprout,
trying to make within me
something friendly, something
like the good gifts of God
which permeate each day.

*Will you proclaim
by word and example
the Good News
of God in Christ?*

Explaining Myself

Casual conversation with my friends
seldom fords the river of religion.
My silent celebrations
with God stay between the two of us.
My meditations seem somehow
too much my own to post
on any bulletin board.
I gladly share with anyone
a good movie,
a good restaurant,
a good book.
After ecstatic spiritual satisfaction though
when the wise one sends clear signals,
I wear my tightest lips.
With this promise then
I can only agree to open arms
of acceptance to imperfect friends,
explain as cogently as I can
that they are most certainly
all right as they are.
I couldn't serve
as an example for anyone.
I only hope
to fully appreciate the joy
of their unspoken, unconscious
proclamation of God's presence.

*Will you seek and serve
Christ in all persons,
loving your neighbor as
yourself?*

Something in Common

I recognize him.
Just another pathetic mortal
like myself, but one in whom
divine love sometimes glimmers.
Now you invite me to see him
in unwelcome cousins,
a leech, a bore, garlic breath,
an angry voice, a leering look,
a patronizing glare.
You even invite me to serve
and more to love
this puddle of good and evil,
this oh so human mess.
In fleeting glimpses
I do notice a minor shadow
of his mirror in myself, in you.
On occasion I see in someone else,
his humility, but always badly tangled
with justifiable pride.
It takes a hearty dose of confusion
to be fully human.
I delight, for example
in being hilariously flummoxed.
I hope he had that.

*Will you strive
for justice and peace
among all people,
and respect the dignity
of every human being?*

To Heal a Broken World

You flaunt before me
your anger in the temple, Jesus,
a passion for righteousness.
Like you I hate my failure
to reconfigure a world
which slashes and crushes,
which murders and starves.
At the same time
I rise from your
rich table of mercy
and stand in all the noble grandeur
granted to each of us.
I see the pain all around me
and despite the glory given everyone
I find no way to fix the problem.
Miserably I watch the ones
who walk too fast, too many,
toward the mass grave
which already contains everyone
who went before me.
Even those already walking
in the caravan to corruption
carry barely enough hope
to look toward you, toward me,
and wonder whether a smile
might appear to say simply
hello.

I will, with God's help.

Strength and Weakness

Peace be with you, my savior said,
savior because I find my peace in him.
I promise to keep his name
ever between myself and the world.
If God is to help me pass
through bombs and hunger,
through hatred and guilt,
God must waggle a handful
of magic words in my face,
and yet convey them
with subtlety, quietly,
a whisper among my intuitions.
I promise to conduct
such treasures to someone else
who needs them, I promise
in full knowledge that I cannot do so.
Justice, freedom, a power to believe
that death itself is dead,
all ride on my foolish certainty
that like your bleeding hands
nailed to the cross of mortality,
my own hands bear the full weight
of my dying body, and they will be
sustained by love,
will always be sustained.

Poetry About the Baptismal Covenant?

In 1969 when Dorothy Day asked me to paint the Beatitudes on the basement wall of the Catholic Worker in the Lower East Side, I did the best I could. When someone really good asks you to do something, you don't walk off whistling. You never know what kind of spirits watch from backstage. While doing the painting, I learned that if you spend an hour or two a day thinking about any four or five words from the Beatitudes, each word will fold out into something more lush than you might expect. Miss Day specified the Phillips translation ("Happy are those who claim nothing..."). There in the basement, the ones who would see it were the people who came to get a bowl of soup, a piece of bread and a cup of coffee, gifts given to the poor by the Worker for over 75 years now.

When John Lane Denson asked if I had any poems on the Baptismal Covenant, the question came at me much as Dorothy Day's had. Of course I'd never considered writing such a poem before, but still I had to try it, to rub up against the BC and see what kind of sparks might fly. Poetry has to do with what you're experiencing, and while we all renew our Covenant each time our parish has a baptism, I had pretty much glossed over the words until Lane made me look at them in earnest.

Like the Beatitudes, the Baptismal Covenant means more when you sit around with it for awhile. Though he would not admit it (might not even know it), Lane was teaching me. Because he

does it so naturally, so comfortably, I suspect him of channeling for some stray saint. My poems attempt to pass on what I received from him.

On most days the process of writing poetry opens doors into myself and out of myself. When I'm lucky, it brings me into others as well. By becoming a poet, I have opened my eyes to all the astonishing events I previously took to be just everyday trivia. My role as a poet is to keep my eyes open and try to understand what it means. — Rob Cogswell

Biographical note

Robert Elzy Cogswell retired from his position as Director of the Booher Library at the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest at the end of 2006, after 27 years among people working toward the priesthood. Before retirement though, he felt himself called to write poetry, and now he does it every day. He was a Poet of the Week on the Poetry Super Highway in February, 2007. He has poems recently published or forthcoming in *Consciousness, Literature and the Arts*, *Passager*, *Lilliput Review*, *Farfelu*, *Beacons*, *Nimble Spirit*, and elsewhere. His online poetry is accessible by Googling "Elzy Cogswell." Rob is a communicant at St. Mark's in Austin. Earlier in life he was a panhandler in Manhattan.

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