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INTRODUCING THE THIRTY-NINE ARTICLES

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At this year's Church Society Conference frequent references were made to the Thirty-nine Articles. Donald Allister, Rector of Cheadle and a vice chairman of the Society, was one of the conference speakers. Here he writes about this important foundational document of the Church of England.

Many churchgoers have heard of the 39 Articles, but few know much about them. Older members may remember that new incumbents used to have to read the Articles in full on their first Sunday in a parish (often they replaced the sermon). Those who have been to an ordination or induction recently may have heard the bishop asking the candidate if he accepts the 39 Articles as bearing witness to God's truth. You might even have noticed occasional pulpit references to the Articles.

Who wrote them? Where are they to be found? Why are they so important to the Church of England? What do they say? Are they at all relevant today?

You can find the 'Articles of Religion' at the back of the *Book of Common Prayer*. They were not included in the *Alternative Service Book* 1980, as that book was designed to go alongside, not to replace, the older prayer book. Their wording is in places pretty old-fashioned, but they can still be understood with a bit of effort.

Historical Background

A number of serious controversies arose within European and English Christianity in the 16th century, and various attempts were made to reach agreement, and to define what Christians should believe and how they should behave. 1536 saw the publication of Ten Articles, a compromise statement designed to avoid the looming splits in the church. In 1539 Henry VIII brought in Six Articles, trying to stop the growth of the new reformed faith.

In 1552 the reformers had won, and published Forty-two Articles, largely the work of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, and Nicholas Ridley, Bishop of London. These attempted to avoid controversy, to establish unity among believers, and to deal with extremes in the church. The Forty-two Articles were revised into Thirty-nine by the Convocations of 1563 and 1571. They have been unchanged since then, forming part of the teaching of the Church of England. Since 1865 all clergy have had to subscribe to them.

Compromise Teaching?

The Articles are often mistakenly thought of as a compromise between the mediaeval Catholicism of Rome and the Calvinism of Geneva. In fact they definitely and clearly stand with the reformers of Germany and Geneva, and against the Roman teachings defined at the Council of Trent (1545-63). They were seen by Rome, and by the reformed churches, as placing the Church of England firmly within the ranks of the Protestant Reformation. It is only a minority of Anglicans, with decided leanings to Rome, who have tried (unsuccessfully) to claim the Articles as speaking for them. But in some ways they are a compromise, or *via media*, between different views in the 16th

century church. Here are five areas where they attempt to make peace (not by fudging the issues, but by stating truth clearly and rejecting extremes on both sides).

1. The Articles challenge both Roman and Anabaptist error (the Anabaptists, forerunners of today's Baptists, were at the extreme wing of the Reformation, much as the house churches and some charismatics can now be seen as extreme Evangelicals). Many of the false teachings dealt with in the Articles are still much in evidence today in Anglicanism, Catholicism and Nonconformity.
2. They reject both Arminian and what is now called Hypercalvinist teaching. Arminians believed, and believe, that we can contribute to our own salvation in various ways; they reject God's free grace and predestination out of hand. Hypercalvinists take the Biblical emphasis on predestination, but twist it to say that you shouldn't try to persuade people to believe in case they are not among the Elect. The Articles insist that the doctrine of predestination and election is helpful for promoting assurance in believers, but dangerous and not to be dwelt upon to unbelievers.
3. The Thirty-nine Articles insist on the one hand (with Rome and against the Anabaptists) that the church, its councils, and its rites and ceremonies, have real authority and validity. But they stress (against Rome and with the Anabaptists) that the church is prone to err and must always remain under the authority of Scripture.
4. They teach that sacraments are not just empty signs (as extreme reformers said and still say), but are truly effectual. But they make plain that there is nothing automatic in the way sacraments work (despite the still unchanged Roman view).
5. They challenge the Roman teaching that the Pope has authority over civil rulers, but equally they stand against the Anabaptist view that civil rulers have no authority over Christians.

The Role of Doctrine

The Articles are statements of doctrine, and doctrine isn't all that popular these days. But it is important. Scripture contains so much teaching that it can be hard to see its overall message and how its parts fit together. Doctrine is the church's God-given tool to help us understand it. If we compare Scripture to the countryside, with its amazing variety of life, doctrine is like a cultivated garden, bringing together in order many different varieties. The gardener helps us to appreciate the magnificence of nature, but despite the beauty of gardens nobody pretends that they are the real thing. The garden serves nature by systematising it, so we can study and enjoy it better. Doctrine serves God's revelation, by setting it out under various headings and themes. Of course doctrine must be constantly reviewed in the light of what we learn from Scripture. We must revise it if it conflicts with the Bible. It is thus more like a loose-leaf book than a bound volume. The Articles do not have the same status as scripture. They are a tool, and an important one, to help us understand what God has said.

Extracts from the Thirty-nine Articles

4. Of the Resurrection of Christ. Christ did truly rise again from death, and took again his body, with flesh, bones, and all things appertaining to the perfection of Man's nature; wherewith he ascended into Heaven.

6. Of the sufficiency of the holy Scriptures for salvation. Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to

be required of any man, that it should be believed...or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation...

7. Of the Old Testament. The Old Testament is not contrary to the New.

10. Of Free-Will. The condition of Man after the fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works, to faith, and calling upon God: Wherefore we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing (leading) us.

11. Of the Justification of Man. We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by Faith, and not for our own works.

17. Of predestination and Election. ...the godly consideration of Predestination, and our Election in Christ, is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons.

18. Of obtaining eternal Salvation only by the Name of Christ...Scripture doth set out...only the Name of Jesus Christ, whereby men must be saved.

25. Of the sacraments. Sacraments ordained of Christ be not only badges or tokens...but rather they be...effectual signs of grace.

26. Of the Unworthiness of the Ministers, which hinders not the effect of the Sacrament. Although in the...Church...evil be...mingled with...good, and sometimes the evil have...authority in the (ministry)...yet forasmuch as they...minister by (Christ's) commission and authority, we may use their Ministry... Nevertheless, it appertaineth to the discipline of the Church, that inquiry be made of evil Ministers, and that they be accused...and finally being found guilty, by just judgement be deposed.

28. Of the Lord's Supper...The body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten in the Supper, only in a heavenly and spiritual manner. The means by which the body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper is faith.

37. Of the Civil Magistrates...The Bishop of Rome hath no jurisdiction in this Realm of England. The Law...may punish Christian men with death...It is lawful of Christian men...to wear weapons, and serve in the wars.