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THE 39 ARTICLES

A FAITH FOR TODAY (1) ARTICLES 1-5

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Introducing the Thirty-nine Articles

Many churchgoers have heard of the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion but few know much about them. Older church members may remember that new clergy 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 Thirty-nine Articles as bearing witness to God's truth.

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? Those are the questions I hope to answer in this series. In this introduction we will look at the background to the Articles. Then in the following chapters we will look in some detail at what the Articles actually say and how they apply in today's world.

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 old-fashioned but they can still be understood with some effort. Where I think it will help, I have rendered them into slightly more modern English for the purposes of these studies.

Historical background

A number of serious controversies arose between the European and English Church in the sixteenth century and various attempts were made to reach agreement, 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 produced and published Forty-two Articles, largely the work of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury and Nicholas Ridley, Bishop of London. These attempted to avoid serious controversy, to establish real unity among believers and to deal with various 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 official teaching of the Church of England. Since 1865 all clergy have had to subscribe to the Thirty-nine Articles.

Compromise teaching?

The Articles are often mistakenly thought of as a compromise between the medieval catholicism of Rome and the Calvinism of Geneva. In fact they stand definitely and clearly 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 such a compromise.

But in some ways they are a compromise, or middle way, between different views in the sixteenth century church. We will see this in more detail later in the series but for now, 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 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 hyper-calvinist teaching. Arminians believe that we can contribute to our own salvation in various ways; they reject God's free grace and predestination out of hand. Hyper-calvinists take the biblical emphasis on predestination but twist it to say that you should not 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 is not 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 systematizing 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.

Content of this series

The twelve studies on the Thirty-nine Articles will cover the following themes, finishing with an attempt to add some new Articles for today's church.

God (Articles 1-5) Scripture and truth (6-8) Salvation (9-11, 18) The Christian life (12-16) Predestination and election (17) The church (19-22) The ministry (23, 24, 26, 32) The sacraments (25, 27) Holy Communion (28-31) Organising the church (33-36) Living in the world (37-39) Articles for today (a-q)

A. God

Article 1. Faith in the Holy Trinity

Article 2. The Word, or Son of God, who became truly Man

Article 3. The descent of Christ into Hades

Article 4. The Resurrection of Christ

Article 5. The Holy Spirit

The Articles do not claim to be a complete compendium of Christian beliefs. They give us a superb outline of the main themes and they deal with areas of disagreement or heresy current when they were written. Most of them are still current today. If you follow doctrinal matters, it may not surprise you to hear that the nature of God, the person and work of Christ, and the Holy Spirit, were all subjects argued about in the sixteenth century church. Very little changes!

God the Holy Trinity

Article 1 is a brilliantly concise statement of a complicated but thoroughly biblical truth. It teaches us that there is only one God, that he is alive and true (trustworthy), that he is eternal (without beginning or end), and that he is 'without body, parts or passions' (not able to be affected or changed by anything we can do). It insists that he alone made and upholds all that exists, in the spiritual world as well as the physical; no room here for the dualism that makes the devil some sort of opposite and equal force with whom God has constantly to do battle. And, while insisting on God's oneness, the Article teaches of the three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All are personal, all are God, all are of the same 'substance' (kind), all are eternal (no room here for the idea that the Son only began to exist in the earthly life of Jesus) but they are one. They are not three parts of one God, because God is without parts. Each one is fully God, but together they are one God.

I have mentioned a few of the errors that often crop up when people think or talk about God. These are important in practice, in that wrong understanding here can affect our whole relationship with God, our salvation, our confidence in him, our hope for the future. There is no space here to go into all these points in detail, so we will simply focus on the way in which each person of the Trinity is fully God.

It is so easy for committed Christians to think of Jesus as quite distinct from the Father (kind as opposed to the Father's sternness, or approachable as opposed to the Father's inaccessibility). But Jesus himself tells us, 'I and the Father are one' (John 10:30) and 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). It is easy for us to think of the Spirit as impersonal, more of a force than a being. But Jesus tells us, 'You know him, for he lives with you and will be in you' (John 14:17). We are tempted to think of the Spirit as very different from Jesus himself, but Jesus, talking about the coming of the Spirit to believers, says, 'On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you' (John 14:20). And of the believer receiving the Spirit he adds, 'My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him' (John 14:23). In other words, where we see Jesus we see the Father, where the Spirit is, there is God in all

His fullness. St Paul has the same idea, because he uses the phrases 'Spirit of God', 'Spirit of Christ', 'Spirit' and 'Christ' interchangeably (e.g. Romans 8: 9-10).

The Person of Christ

Who is Jesus? Is he both man and God, and if so, how can those be held together? Throughout church history, including both the sixteenth century and today, people have come out with some very odd ideas about this. The Bible is clear in its teaching that Jesus is both fully man and fully God but assorted heretics have tried to deny this by making him half man, half God; or man until his baptism, then God; or man until his resurrection, then God.

Articles 2-4 insist on holding together the various biblical teachings. From eternity the Son of God (called 'the Word' in John's gospel) has been one with God. He did not have a beginning at some point in time but has always been. In Mary's womb he took flesh and human nature upon himself, joining together full Godhead and complete manhood in one person: Jesus Christ. Taking Mary's substance is important: Jesus was not 'pretend man', God impersonating man, but fully man. As such he died, was buried, descended to Hades (the 'place of the dead' in ancient language - not hell as the English prayer book wrongly translates the original Latin of the Articles). And he rose from the dead as a complete man, taking the fullness of human nature into heaven, where he remains as both man and God, as Lord and Judge, until he comes again.

The Work of Christ

The same three Articles, 2-4, also deal with the work of Christ on the cross for us. One important point is that his death was 'to reconcile the Father to us'. The cross does not change us into the sort of people God can accept and forgive. There is noting in us which is or can be acceptable to him. The cross has the astonishing power to change God's attitude to us. It placates his wrath, or (in older language) propitiates his anger. Another lesson here is that Jesus' death is sufficient and effective for actual sins as well as for our guilt and sinfulness inherited from Adam. Some teachers said (and say) that the cross makes it possible for God to forgive us, by dealing with original sin: but we still need to atone for (deal with) actual sins we have committed. The Articles, like the Bible, will have none of that. Christ's death is a perfect, sufficient and complete sacrifice for all the sins of his people. Thank God for that!

The Holy Spirit

One of the main differences between the eastern churches (nowadays including Greek and Russian Orthodox) and the western, going back hundreds of years before the Reformation, was the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Article 5 keeps the Church of England firmly within the western camp by insisting that the Spirit 'proceeds from the Father and Son'. The eastern Christians omit the phrase 'from the Son' from their creeds and statements, as they believe the Spirit is a gift from the Father alone. Jesus does say that the Father will send the Spirit (John 14:16, 26) but he also talks of 'the Counsellor ... whom I will send to you from the Father' (John 15: 26). It does seem that the eastern churches drive too hard a wedge between Jesus and the Father.

Article 5 also insists that the Spirit is fully God and shares in the substance, majesty and glory of the Father and the Son. That includes the fact that he is personal, knowable, hard on sin and a friend of sinners.