

Article reprinted from Cross†Way Issue Summer 1997 No. 65

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THE 39 ARTICLES

A FAITH FOR TODAY (2) ARTICLES 6-8, SCRIPTURE AND TRUTH

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The Articles are very clear on the importance and the nature of the Bible and on how Scripture relates to other statements of faith.

The Sufficiency of Scripture

The first sentence of Article 6 encapsulates this essential reformation doctrine perfectly: 'Holy Scripture contains all things necessary for salvation.' This was (and remains) a direct attack on both Romanism and extreme or radical Protestantism. Rome claims that the church may define doctrines not described in Scripture and insists that they be accepted by those wanting to be saved; fairly recent examples are the teachings about the 'immaculate conception' and the 'assumption' of Mary, the mother of Jesus. In 1854 Pope Pius IX decreed that all Christians were to accept the idea that Mary, from the moment of her conception, was free from all sin, original or actual. In 1950 Pope Pius XII taught, again as an article of faith, that Mary did not die but was taken bodily straight to heaven. As long as doctrines like these remain part of official Roman Catholic teaching (which must be accepted in full by the faithful) it is hard to see how Rome and Protestantism can be reconciled. The doctrine of Scripture is at stake.

But extreme Protestants also add to what the Bible teaches. The insistence that speaking in tongues in a necessary sign of conversion, or that church leaders must be obeyed in all areas of life, or that the State has no rights over the Christian believer; these unfortunate aberrations have all been taught, and continue to be taught. In each case church leaders are setting themselves above Scripture.

But the truth of the sufficiency of Scripture is not just for the sake of defending the Faith against Catholic and Protestant extremists. It is a robust assertion of a glorious and comforting message, learnt by the Reformers at great cost to themselves. Even when the Church hides or distorts the message, the believer may go straight to the source, to God's very voice, and hear for himself or herself. Even when the church or its leaders appear to be teaching rubbish or laying heavy burdens on us, our confidence in God and his salvation need not be shaken, because we do not depend on the Church or its leaders for salvation: we depend on God alone, saving by the power of his Word. Praise him for that!

Old and New Testaments

Articles 6 and 7 deal, from different angles, with the existence of Old and New Testaments in the Bible. The word 'Testament' can be misleading. It comes from the Latin translation of the Bible made by Erasmus in the early 1500s. 'Covenant' would be a better word in modern English, though the Articles suggest that the distinction between the parts of the Bible is unhelpful; it would be much better if we just had one Bible with sixty-six books and no blank page after the first thirty-nine. Article 7 has to make the point, because it is so often forgotten or denied, that the Old Testament and the New do not contradict each other. How could God contradict himself? How can Christians say that he does? Both Testaments teach clearly that the only way of salvation is through the shedding of a substitute's blood, that there is no forgiveness unless the sin is punished in another, that God's promises of blessing through Abraham's seed, his giving of the Law and

sacrificial system through Moses, and his establishing of a kingship in the line of David, are all eternal truths, pointing to the one way of salvation through God's Messiah.

Often the status of Old Testament law seems to be a problem for Christians. Article 7 follows the clear (and correct) teaching of Calvin and other Reformers, dividing the Law into its three component parts. The ritual law, outlining the sacrifices and ways of dealing with sin (foreshadowing the perfect sacrifice of the true Lamb of God), is fulfilled in Christ and therefore no longer applicable - though we can still learn from it. The civil law deals with the existence of Old Testament Israel as a theocracy, a nation-state under the direct rule of God; that no longer applies, since Israel as a nation came under judgment for its rejection of Christ; Christians nowadays are to live under the law of the country in which God sets them to live - but the Old Testament civil law can still provide useful examples of how people can live together in justice and peace. The moral law, that is the Ten Commandments and numerous other teachings to do with holiness of life, are a reflection of the character of God himself, and we break it at our peril.

The Roman church's insistence on accepting the Apocrypha as part of Scripture, despite the fact that it was written after the New Testament and is full of very dubious 'history', necessitated the Reformers' statement that the 'canonical' (genuine) books were those accepted by the Early Church. Our sixty-six books were all recognized as part of God's word during the first two centuries AD but the apocryphal books certainly were not. Rome decreed at the Council of Trent (1546) that anyone who did not accept the apocryphal books as sacred and canonical was anathematized; so much for the likes of me (and, I hope, you).

Creeds and Doctrinal Statements

Article 8 is very important for a number of reasons. The three creeds found in our Prayer Book are commended but not for their antiquity or the fact that the church has long accepted them. This is the difference between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. The only ground on which they are to be believed is that 'their contents may be proved by the definite statements of holy Scripture.'

This idea applies equally to all other doctrinal statements. The Articles dispute many official Roman teachings simply because they contradict, or cannot be proved by, the Bible. The Church of England only claims authority for the Articles themselves because they conform to Scripture. One of the chief tenets of biblical faith is that everything we do and say must be regularly submitted to the bar of Scripture. It is so easy to fall into the Roman trap of developing our own traditions, often good ones, then valuing them above all else. Especially is this so in strong denominations or strong local churches.

One of the most important issues facing Christians at the end of this century is the whole question of truth; what is true, how do we know, whether there can be one truth for some people and another for others, how much room is there for compromise on doctrinal matters - and so on. The Thirty-nine Articles are not absolute truth. But they are a very accurate compendium of Scripture teaching on the issues they deal with, and above all they insist that the only truth of which we can be sure is that given by God in His word. For this we need to stand and fight today, against those who want to compromise with unbelief or heresy, and against today's extreme Protestants who claim to hear the truth direct from God without needing the Bible.