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THE 39 ARTICLES

A FAITH FOR TODAY (7) ARTICLES 19-22: WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

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The church is not a building but a people. The Articles are clear on this basic biblical truth but spell it out in more detail. To understand this we need to think about three distinctions: visible and invisible, local and denominational, organization and organism.

The Visible Church of God

Article 19 describes 'the visible church of Christ'. If there is a visible church, is there also an invisible one? The Bible teaches that there is. All who belong to Christ, wherever they are in time or space, are part of the one true church of which he is the head. Within that invisible church there is no unbelief or defiance of Christ's rule. But this true church can only be seen by Christ himself, until we see it in its glory at the end of the age. Until then we dream of and long for the perfect church but we live in a sinful world where the church can only be seen in its visible forms with its many problems.

The same Article describes the visible church as 'a congregation of faithful people'. That implies that each local fellowship is the church, rather than just part of a diocesan or national or wider body. This too is clear Bible teaching. Each gathering of believers, meeting to hear the Word of God and be built up in Christ, is the church (not a small part of the church, not a church but the church). Local churches usually belong to wider groupings such as denominations or national churches and those wider groups can be described as churches (as the Article speaks of the church of Rome). Those groups can have advantages over local fellowships or parishes, in respect of size, influence, money or power - if those are advantages and not distractions. But when we are talking about the visible church we must remember that its focus is at the local level.

It is easy to think of a church as an organization. That is true in that the church needs to be organized. But when we describe it in terms of its organization (buildings, committees, bishops etc) we are in danger of forgetting what it really is: an organism, always breathing, feeding, changing, growing. The Article describes the visible church as a congregation of faithful people 'in which the pure word of God is preached and in which the sacraments are rightly administered'. The church, like a living being, constantly depends on nourishment from outside itself. It is not an organization that continues to exist on its own. Like an organism, the moment it stops receiving what it needs from outside, it stops developing and changing, it dies, begins to degenerate and eventually ceases to exist.

Many Churches or One?

We have already seen that there are different definitions of the church. Ultimately it will be seen that there is just one church, what we now call the invisible or the true church. For the present we see many local churches, each entitled to be called the church. And there are wider groups claiming the title of church. Does that mean that we in our own church belong to the same church as all Anglicans throughout the world, or that we do not belong to the same church as Christian friends who may be Baptist or Methodist?

In both cases the answer is 'no'. Just because a congregation belongs to a body such as the Church of England does not mean it is a real living church. The Article is clear that the church must consist

(at least in part) of believers, that 'the pure word of God' must be preached and the sacraments properly administered. If any one of these conditions is not fulfilled then the congregation, whatever it calls itself and whatever group or denomination it belongs to, is not the church. Within every denomination there are fellowships which can properly be called 'the church' and others which cannot.

And we do belong to the same church as Christian friends of other denominations. Denominations are of relatively little importance. Belonging to the Church of England does not make a congregation a church, any more than does belonging to the Baptist Union or any other human organization. What counts is that our local visible church is a faithful expression of the universal invisible church (as much as it can be with a membership of sinners in a sinful world). If we can truly call ourselves 'the church' then we belong to the same church as Bible-believing Baptists who can truly call their fellowship 'the church'.

There are only two churches: the invisible church (sometimes called 'catholic' which means 'universal') and the visible church which is always a local organism and may voluntarily organize itself into man-made organizations. These organizations can be very helpful and have often been used by God to bring blessing to the church. But they are not churches and treating them as such can have disastrous results: the real local church loses its sense of identity and mission, and the denomination develops a seriously inflated sense of its importance and tries to organize instead of serve the local church. We see in the second paragraph of Article 19 and in Article 22 that denominations or groups of churches have gone seriously wrong in the past: and we must expect that they will do so in the future. A history of being faithful in submission to the Bible does not guarantee a sound future. Present faithfulness and submission are what matter.

Authority in the Church

If each local fellowship is the church and denominations are man-made groups designed to help the church, it is clear that authority does not lie in the denominations. But it must lie somewhere, because authority in the church is very important.

Article 20, in describing the authority of the church, is talking in part about denominations. In its original intent it insisted that the Church of England was free to organize itself without permission from Rome. That is true and right. But that authority does not lie within the Church of England as a denomination. The Church of England is more a federation of independent local churches than a monolithic Rome-like structure. The authority of the denomination stems from the local churches which comprise it. Insofar as they agree to be bound together for their mutual convenience, the resulting organization can speak and act for them. But they are not bound if the denomination oversteps the limits of its authority. This is true legally in that, for example, parish contributions or quotas to the diocese are purely voluntary payments, with no provision for enforcement.

Churches are not meant to be uniform in character. Each is free to decide how it will operate and worship and to interpret Scripture for itself. But here certain all-important safeguards appear, because churches are not fully independent. They depend wholly on the Lord Jesus Christ and must therefore submit to him and his word. There is great freedom in that but never freedom to go against Scripture, or to twist any part of Scripture in a way that is contradicted by the rest (this is where the sects and cults tend to go wrong). The church has the great privilege of holding the Scriptures, to proclaim and preserve them, but it is not to set itself above their teaching.

General councils are gatherings of the leaders of all churches in the world. These were possible in the early centuries but since the massive growth and the great splits of church history they are unimaginable today. Certainly a body like the World Council of Churches is far from being a

general council, not least because so many Bible-believing churches will have nothing to do with its radical theology and politics. But Article 21 still has two important lessons for us.

It insists, firstly, that churches must not come together to talk or plan in any way that looks politically subversive. In the late Middle Ages this was important: it is equally today. The stipulation that rulers (that is political leaders) must agree on any such gathering is not to force the church into submission to the state. This is so it can be seen by all that the church is above board and has no political ambitions. Even though civil leaders may have no Christian beliefs, the church is not to threaten but to support their role. In many ways the church is to be thoroughly revolutionary - but it is never to be political.

Secondly, Article 21 reminds us that even a general council (like its smaller national version, a general synod) is a mixed bag consisting of some who submit to God's word and others who do not. No decision of a council or synod has any authority unless 'it can be shown to be taught by Scripture'. Article 22 underlines this with its sad catalogue of heresies endorsed by the anti-Reformation, Roman Catholic Council of Trent (1545-63). The same condemnation applies to other more recent Roman inventions (such as those described in chapter 2).

The Church and the Bible

It is clear that authority in the church lies in the Bible. Human leaders may exercise authority but only insofar as it derives from a faithful preaching of Scripture. Indeed, authority must be exercised, because it is impossible to teach God's word properly without doing so authoritatively, and because the right administration of the sacraments (Article 20) demands a judgment as to who may receive them and who may not. The authority to admit to baptism or communion and the authority to excommunicate must be exercised within the local church. But it can only be exercised by those whose lives are seen to be lived in submission to God's word and whose decisions can be demonstrated to be in accordance with God's word.