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THE 39 ARTICLES

A FAITH FOR TODAY (8) ARTICLES 33-36: ORGANIZING THE CHURCH

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Christ's church needs to be organized. It cannot exist in a state of anarchy, nor is it to be a dictatorship. Freedom and order, love and submission are to exist side by side - as they do in heaven. But on earth this is hard to achieve, because believers are sinful people. We have seen aspects of church order in previous chapters, but Articles 33-36 give us more. These may seem pedantic or irrelevant to the church today: in fact they offer important principles and details.

DISCIPLINE

Article 33 raises the issue of excommunication: officially barring people from receiving Holy Communion and thus cutting them off from the heart of church life and fellowship. The Article does not argue for or against excommunication - a practice of the ancient and mediaeval church - but assumes that it will sometimes be necessary. It is the most drastic of the forms of church discipline: not a popular subject today, but biblical and timely. As we consider excommunication we see principles which should govern all church discipline.

1. Proportionate

We see in Articles 33 and 34 that there are degrees of offence in church life, and that the punishment should fit the crime. Blatant sin against God's Word, combined with refusal to repent, merits excommunication (described in the Preface to the Prayer Book Holy Communion Service). Breaking the traditions of the church where such traditions are not in themselves unbiblical should result in public rebuke. The implication is that breaking unbiblical human rules is not to be seen as wrong at all. Clearly God's Word is to be seen as the primary standard: though the church does have authority to legislate or establish customs in secondary matters, and such rules should not be broken by God-fearing people who understand the importance of authority and of respecting the leaders God gives us.

2. Purposeful

Discipline is necessary, but it must always have a clear purpose and not be vindictive. Article 33 shows that excommunication is meant to lead to repentance, and that when it does the penitent is to be received back into fellowship. Article 34 shows the purpose of rebuking less serious offences: that others will be afraid to offend.

3. Public

In both the more serious and the less serious cases the discipline is to be public: the church must be told to avoid the excommunicate who has broken God's Law, and potential offenders are to be warned off by the warning given to one who breaks lesser church rules. This is different from the matter of private grievances between believers: wherever possible these should be settled privately (Matthew 18:15-17). But public or notorious sin calls for a public remedy.

FORMS OF WORSHIP

We have seen already from Article 34 that each church has the right to establish its own traditions, rules and forms of service; similarly each church is free to change or abolish such man-made rules and forms. Article 34 in effect tells us that two important questions must be asked about any

proposed new forms: and the same questions must regularly be asked about older rules or traditions even if they have been in existence for centuries.

First, is this new proposal (or this ancient tradition) in any way contrary to God's Word (the Bible)? There are clear examples of new services which can be seen to be unbiblical: some of the allowable options within the 1980 ASB Communion Service include prayers for the bread and wine to change (compared to the Prayer Book and other ASB options which pray biblically that the recipients of the bread and wine may be partakers of Christ); some of the ASB funeral options allow prayers for the dead even though Scripture is very plain that after death comes judgment with no further opportunity to repent (Hebrews 9:27). Old traditions can also sometimes be seen on examination to be unbiblical: the Prayer Book describing an infant after baptism as 'regenerate' (born again), or the refusal (frequent until fairly recently) to allow musical instruments other than organs to accompany congregational singing, despite the encouragement to use them in Psalm 150.

Second, is this proposal (or ancient tradition) likely to build up church members in their faith? It is possible for something in itself neutral to cause such argument and division in a particular congregation that it would be wiser not to introduce it: one example might be 'the kiss of peace' in a Communion Service. Or something neutral can be a great help to people's Christian lives: perhaps a 'Pledge Sunday' or a church houseparty might fit into this category. And it happens that longstanding practices, once of great value, now only cocoon people against the challenge of the Gospel, or even put them off: formal styles of worship, dress or address may be examples here.

TEACHING

Article 35 may seem odd at first, directing that homilies be read out in all churches. The point is that at the time of the Reformation many or most clergy were incapable of teaching the Bible. They were used to conducting services in Latin but had received no training in the content, meaning or languages of Scripture. But the great point of the Reformation was that people must be taught the Bible in sermons which they could understand. Rather than try to sack most of the clergy, or make do with very inadequate preaching throughout the country, Archbishop Cranmer and the other Reformers wisely decided to write Bible teaching sermons which could be read out in the parish churches. The books of homilies (sermons) are rather old-fashioned but still make excellent reading - many preachers I have heard would do much better to modernise and re-use these old classics even today!

The principles behind this are clear: Christians need teaching and it is the duty of clergy to provide it. It must be biblical, appropriate to the situation of the hearers ('necessary for these times') and presented in such a way that it can be understood by the people. How important this is in our own day: how important that Christians pray for and encourage their ministers to be teachers of the Word rather than caught up in other concerns.

Ministry

From the need to teach in Article 35 we move very naturally to the appointment or ordination of ministers in Article 36. The Roman Catholic Church disputed the validity of Anglican ordination (as it still does, even today declaring Anglican orders of ministry 'absolutely null and utterly void'). The Reformers insisted that the Church of England's ordination services were perfectly valid, containing all that is necessary and nothing that is superstitious.

This was a deliberate attack back at Rome, because the implication was that the Roman ordination services did not contain all that was necessary and did contain superstition. The Church of England has never said that Roman Catholic orders of ministry are invalid but certainly taught that there was real room for improvement in Rome's services of ordination.

The real difference between the Roman and the Anglican services is that the Church of England presents the primary task of the clergy as being to understand and preach the Bible; the Roman church sees the sacramental functions as primary (and in those days gave little or no place to Scripture at all). So at ordination the Roman priest is given a communion cup as the symbol of his office, whereas the Anglican receives a Bible. 'All things necessary' is summed up in one of the questions asked of the candidates in the Church of England service: Are you persuaded that the holy Scriptures contain sufficiently all doctrine required of necessity for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ? And are you determined out of the said Scriptures to instruct the people committed to your charge ...?

'Nothing superstitious' is a clear challenge to the Roman practice of giving the communion cup at ordination, which suggests that sacraments, in and of themselves, are God's channels of grace and salvation. The biblical understanding, rediscovered by the continental and English Reformers of the sixteenth century, is that sacraments are visual aids, valuable signs, but secondary to God's Word which must be taught and which is the true life-giving and life-changing power.