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THE 39 ARTICLES

A FAITH FOR TODAY (9) ARTICLES 37-39: LIVING IN THE WORLD

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To some these three Articles seem irrelevant today. No so. The principles which lie behind them, and the details of what they assert, need to be heard and understood in our generation. A little explanation of the historical context is necessary: but that will clearly show that Articles 37, 38 and 39 are as relevant and important today as they ever were.

Historical background

In the sixteenth century the Roman Catholic Church, and a group of extremists who counted themselves among the Reformers but were really revolutionaries (the 'Anabaptists'), were making some extraordinary claims. Rome, for example, said that all governments, kings and rulers were subject to the Pope. Some of the Anabaptists taught that Christians were not allowed to own property or possessions, but must share all things in common. Rome claimed that the Pope had authority to overturn the decisions of civil courts - and that civil courts had no jurisdiction over clergy! The Anabaptists argued that Christians should refuse to swear an oath in court, even if that meant that justice would not be done!

What all this boils down to is that both groups claimed that the church as an organization took precedence over the government, and even over the law. Church members were to take their lead from church leaders, rather than from earthly rulers. They were to disobey the law if church leaders told them to. Their primary earthly loyalty was to be to their church rather than to their country or sovereign.

These views indicate a gross unbiblical emphasis on the earthly powers and rights of the church, an anti-biblical attack on the powers and rights of the state, and a serious misunderstanding of the way that God has ordered society. Articles 37, 38 and 39 give the biblical teaching in these important areas: we can consider this teaching under three headings.

1. Government is from God

Various Bible passages, notably Matthew 22:15-22, Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter:13-17 insist that Christians must be subject to their earthly rulers. This is because human authority comes from God, and human leaders are raised up by God as his agents to secure the stability of society, the rewarding of those who deserve it and the punishment of evildoers. Christians are not therefore free to disobey the law, even though they know that they come under God's higher law. We do come under a higher law, God's law of love, but we are not above the law of the land.

Church leaders have no right whatsoever to interfere with the law, or to claim exemption from it for themselves or their church members. They are not entitled to instruct or encourage their members to break the law (except in the rarest cases where the law of the land tells them to do something directly contrary to Scripture - and even then it must be up to the individual's conscience before God, not a matter of obedience to a human church leader). The lawful government has full authority over the earthly lives of all its citizens: the Bible permits it to conscript people to serve in war, and even to execute people for the most serious crimes if it chooses to do that.

This means that the church as a human organization must be subject to the law. In this country that will mean complying with all the appropriate rules about charities, accounting, care of listed buildings, registration of marriages, as well as employment legislation, health and safety regulations, and so on. Some of that may be tedious, time-consuming and costly: but we would be going against God and his Word if we did not do our utmost to submit to the authorities he has put over us.

The position of the Monarch as Supreme Governor of the Church of England causes problems for some people - largely because they misunderstand it or because it has been abused at times. It does not mean that we should allow the Queen to act as some sort of super-archbishop, or see ourselves as subject to civil authority when that contradicts the Bible. What it means is that the church is not subject to any other human authority at home or abroad. If a gathering of English bishops (for example) told parish clergy to ignore or disobey some aspect of the country's marriage law, the clergy would be right to disobey the bishops and obey the law (that is the Crown in Parliament). Or if a foreign church leader such as the Bishop of Rome (the Pope) tried to interfere with English churches or English law, he would rightly come under the condemnation of our Monarch.

The Monarch as Supreme Governor is therefore a protection for the church from any illegal interference. The English church must be subject to the Queen's ministers and courts, but equally it must be protected by the Queen's ministers and courts from any attempt at control or interference from outsiders. Thus if the Roman Catholic Church tried to take over the Church of England, or if unbelievers tried to make it change its doctrine, we would have every right to go to the courts or Parliament for protection (in the same way as Paul appealed to the Roman emperor for protection from the Jews who were persecuting him).

But this does not mean that the Monarch has the right to interfere in the church. The Queen is 'Supreme Governor' not 'Supreme Head' of the church. Supreme headship belongs to Christ alone and even the Monarch is subject to him. So Article 37 spells out that the Monarch has no rights to preach or minister the sacraments: these are aspects of headship in the church which Christ has delegated to duly authorised ministers. The Monarch has no right to change or undermine the church's doctrine, even though multi-faith services in Westminster Abbey in recent years have done so. One matter which needs putting right is the existence of the very few 'Royal Peculiars' such as the Abbey and the Chapel at Windsor which come solely under the Queen's personal jurisdiction. Article 37 is not meant to put the Monarch above the law or above the church's doctrine and practice: these must be derived from the Bible, and the Queen, just as much as bishops, clergy and lay people, must be subject to them.

2. God's kingdom is not of this world

It seems likely that in heaven there will be no wars, no private property, no civil law or courts. And our citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20). But while we are on earth we are still fully subject to earthly law because it is part of God's pattern for human society. When Jesus said that his followers are 'in the world' but 'not of the world' (John 17:6-19) he did not mean that we are free to ignore the world's rules or to live as though they did not exist. Our primary loyalty is to him and his kingdom as revealed in Scripture, but part of the rule of his kingdom is to be subject to human authority on earth. This even applies when that authority is an unbeliever (as with the Roman emperors of Jesus' and Paul's time): still Caesar had God-given rights over God's people - rights of taxation and even of execution (Matthew 22:21, John 19:11).

We need to remember that God makes a distinction between his perfect kingdom (heaven), and this imperfect world. Even in heaven there will be rule and authority (Revelation 4:4), because that is part of God's nature and of his perfect plan for us. But we are not to assume that the ways of heaven and its freedoms all apply to believers while we are on earth. 'My kingdom is not of this

world' said Jesus (John 18:36). Thus we as believers have dual citizenship while we remain on earth. We are subject to the rules of both countries, England and Heaven; and Heaven's rules make provision for that dual citizenship, obedience and loyalty.

3. Christians are not revolutionaries

At many times in church history there have been extremist Christians who have been so committed to their heavenly citizenship that they have either considered themselves free of earthly law or have even seen it as their calling to overthrow earthly government in favour of a 'more biblical' system. Articles 37-39 make it plain that this is not the way for Bible believers. The government in the days when the Thirty-nine Articles were written was far from perfect (though perhaps better in our eyes than that of Jesus' day). But neither Jesus, nor Paul, nor the sixteenth century Reformers taught or encouraged political uprising or revolution. The German church Reformer Martin Luther even encouraged the ruler to put down a major uprising by force, even though some of those involved were Christian believers.

Of course belonging to Jesus Christ should revolutionize our lives. We will not create anarchy by doing away with private property and ownership, but we will want to give generously of our substance to those who need it (Article 38). This sort of behaviour will influence society - Christian initiatives led to the formation of hospitals, and hospices, schools and universities, freedoms and democracy. We will work and pray for reform rather than revolution.