

Article reprinted from Cross†Way Issue Winter 2000 No. 79

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

THE THIRTY NINE ARTICLES

A FAITH FOR TODAY (11) ARTICLES 23, 24, 26, 32: THE CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

Donald Allister

Who can minister?

Christians have often disagreed as to what human authorisation, if any, is needed to be a preacher of God's word. Some say an inner conviction of God's call is the sole requirement; others insist on selection, training and ordination by the church before any public ministry. The Thirty-nine Articles come much closer to the second position, allying the Church of England on this issue more closely with Rome than with extreme Protestantism. This is for two reasons. Firstly, a strong doctrine of the church teaches that although ministers preach God's word in God's name, they are called by the church. Secondly, a suspicion of the excessive individualism which tends to say 'I feel called to ...' or 'God has gifted me to ...' leads to the insistence that calling must at the very least be ratified by the church.

Called and sent

In fact Article 23 does not only say that a call to ministry must be ratified by the church. It argues that the call will normally come from the church. The preacher is to be 'called and sent' by those with authority in the church to call and send. Where does God come into this? What about the inner call? Obviously God is not denied and the inner call not repudiated. But two important lessons must be learned. Firstly, no-one can be sure of God's call unless it comes through his ministers. Secondly, the church itself has the right and the duty to call and send ministers 'into the Lord's vineyard'.

Calling and sending

This privilege, of calling and sending for God and in his name, is closely linked with the preaching ministry. It is by preaching that God calls us into his kingdom and commissions us all as active worker-Christians. So it is by his ministers that God calls new ministers and sends them to preach. The Article wisely insists that only the more senior ministers be given the role of calling and sending others. Historically this duty has usually been reserved to bishops, but (again wisely) the Article does not insist on this as a theological necessity but leaves some freedom and flexibility. So it is wholly right for the leaders of a congregation to call and appoint ministers to work within that congregation, or missionaries to go out from it.

How do you react to the idea of church leaders calling and sending out new ministers and missionaries, rather than waiting until people hear the call for themselves? If we think this through it will drastically alter (for the better) our ideas about the church and ministry.

How to minister?

Article 24 deals with an important aspect of how ministry is to be exercised, and 26 and 32 suggest others.

With clarity

The point about using a language understood by the people was to ensure that English rather than Latin was used for public worship in England (this was definitely anti-Rome, for the Roman church did not accept the point until the late 20th century). It also reminds us that the basic job of the

preacher is to communicate God's word. That involves explaining it, making its message crystal clear.

The preacher must wrestle with the text until he has understood it, indeed until it has become part of him. He must get to know his people so well that he can talk on their level in a way they accept. Then he must put God's word into words for them. By an astonishing miracle of grace his words actually become God's words to that congregation. The task of making them so is the preacher's, though he and his congregation will work hard and pray hard for the active involvement of God's Spirit. Without the Spirit the whole exercise is a waste of time but with him it is gloriously powerful, turning a humanly-planned church service into a time of meeting and hearing the God who lives and speaks.

With integrity

Articles 26 and 32 both suggest, in different ways, that the preacher's life ought to live up to his message. There is the necessary insistence that an unworthy life does not invalidate the message (more on this below). And there is the realistic acceptance that in this sinful world some very unsuitable people will achieve leadership in the church. A minister who after due process of law is found guilty of an offence should be punished and may be deposed. If his life or beliefs do not commend the gospel he preaches then the church has the right and the duty to stop him preaching. Would that our bishops took this more seriously!

The teaching about the marriage of ministers does not just repudiate the unbiblical Roman nonsense that priests must be celibate. It also assumes and teaches that ministers are to strive for godliness in themselves (and that marriage can actually help with the struggle for godliness). One of the great triumphs of early European Protestantism was the establishment of a new gift from God for the whole church: the minister's wife, home and family were seen as a source of blessing to him and to the congregation. His life in this respect was to set an example for others.

How to receive ministry?

If the Articles teach the duties of ministers they also insist on the congregation playing its part. Article 26 encourages all church members with a wonderful truth: the word and sacraments can be validly ministered even by a sinner. This was and is hotly contested by the Roman church with its impossible and unrealistic notion that preaching and sacraments are only valid when ministered by one whose outward life and inner heart are totally pure. The fact is that no minister is wholly pure. Clergy are all sinners but like all Christians are forgiven, called and used by God's astonishing grace.

Understanding the word

So the job of church members is not to enquire too closely into the minister's worthiness, or worry that his imperfections may stop them receiving God's grace. They are to receive and understand the message, beginning with the truth that God uses sinners as his servants. This is a gloriously liberating truth for ministers and laity alike, even though many find it so hard to accept.

Trust the word

The key to accepting the idea that God can minister to you by a sinner is to believe his promises, to receive word and sacraments 'by faith'. Word and sacraments do not 'work' because of any power in the minister (this is the folly of the Roman doctrine of priesthood on which so much other error depends). They are powerful because God has appointed them as his means and promised blessing when they are used. If you trust his promises concerning preaching and sacraments, receiving them as God's word to you, he will bless them to you even though they are ministered by unworthy men.

Ordinary people!

A final liberating truth from these four Articles is that preachers and church leaders are ordinary people, not a race apart. This means that they should be more approachable than priests-on-a-pedestal, and also that the ministry is an open calling, not restricted to special sorts of men.

Not without sin

Article 26 deals with serious sin by ministers and suggests that in certain cases men will have to be deposed. The assumption behind this is clear: no one, even a church leader, is without sin. So the threat of punishment, even removal from office, is rightly held over all ministers. This reminds them that they have responsibilities and that they will be held to account. It ought to keep them humble with the reminder that God's blessing on their ministry does not ignore, condone or atone for their sins. And it ought to encourage them with the assurance that their imperfections, failures and disobedience cannot stop God from working to bless his people when he chooses.

Not without humanity

Ministers and leaders in the church have real human needs. They need the reminder of their duty to God and to his flock. They need the threat of punishment if they sin as well as the encouragement of God's blessing when they do their duty. They may need to be married. They certainly need to grow in godliness. They need your support and your prayer.