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THE THIRTY NINE ARTICLES

A FAITH FOR TODAY (12) ARTICLES FOR TODAY (PART 1)

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As we have seen, the Thirty-nine Articles cover a great deal of ground. Many aspects of the faith, both theoretical and practical, are dealt with in brief but biblical terms. But they need to be supplemented - not because God's truth changes but because of what it is that the Articles seek to do. They are not meant to be timeless truth (although they contain it). In the sixteenth century they dealt with the controversies, heresies and misunderstandings besetting the church. Most of those are still with us; but we also have other deviations from Scripture today, and it is necessary to face them.

I had intended to write a few 'Articles for Today' as a contribution to that necessary exercise. However I have recently re-read another author's excellent 'first modest attempt in this direction', I cannot better what he has written, so I am reprinting it. The author is the Revd. Dr. Roger Beckwith, and his 'Supplementary Confession of Faith' comes from the final chapter of *The Thirty-Nine Articles - Their Place and Use Today* by J I Packer and R T Beckwith (Latimer House, Oxford, 1984). These supplementary Articles are reprinted with the author's kind permission. I am grateful to have these supplementary Articles to close our series. I have identified them by letters of the alphabet for ease of reference, to distinguish them from the numbered Thirty-nine. In places the language is technical (a dictionary might be helpful!), but for the sake of precision and clarity this is necessary. These Articles for Today deserve and will repay careful study. To make the most sense of them they should be read alongside the Articles which they supplement:

(a) with Article 1 on God

- (b) (c) (d) (e) with Articles 6 and 7 on the Bible
- (f) (g) (h) (i) with Articles 9-18 on Sin and Salvation
- (j) (k) with Articles 19-21 on the Church
- (l) (m) with Articles 23-24 on the Ministry
- (n) (o) with Articles 27-31 on the Sacraments
- (p) (q) deal with issues of morality and discipline not explicitly covered by the Thirty-nine Articles, though Articles, 12, 13, 14, 16, 33, 37, 38 and 39 are relevant.

(a) The Transcendence of God

Though Article 1 does not mean to teach that God, who is Love, and whose Son is himself man, lacks sympathy with our human condition, it does mean to teach that God is independent of the world he has made. When the Bible speaks of God having his dwelling place outside this world, it may be speaking metaphorically, but it is using the metaphor best suited to our finite minds. Those who seek to substitute other metaphors, saying that God is 'the ground of our being' or 'develops with the world' are stressing his immanence at the expense of his glorious transcendence, and are verging on the philosophy of pantheism, which degrades God to the level of his fallen creation.

(b) God and History

The Christian religion is intimately concerned with history. It speaks of God as active in the events of history; both through his ordinary providence, and through his miraculous intervention, exercised especially in the incarnation, virgin birth, life, death, bodily resurrection and ascension of his Son Jesus Christ. It also speaks of God as beginning history by creating the world, and as

summing up history by judging the world, when Jesus Christ returns in visible glory. Though, in relation to events remote from human experience, particularly the creation and final consummation, the Bible may make more use of metaphorical language than usual, it cannot be said that even these events are altogether outside history, and in relation to events between these two terms such an assertion would be still less defensible. To call an event untrue or unhistorical, or to require that it be 'demythologised', simply because it is miraculous or otherwise incompatible with modern secular thought, is sheer unbelief. All that can rightly be required is that biblical history should be interpreted in accordance with the genuine canons of ancient historiography, at their highest ethical level.

(c) Revelation

In all God's acts and works he is manifest to those who have eyes to see. Above all, he is manifest in the life of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word. However, God's revelation would be partial and obscure without the interpretative words of Christ himself, the prophets and the apostles, which have been given permanent form in Holy Scripture. Moreover, because of fallen man's refusal to have the true God in his knowledge, God's revelation is wholly inapprehensible apart from the saving work of the Holy Spirit in man's heart. It is through the Spirit's work that man is personally confronted with God as Creator and Redeemer.

(d) The Inspiration of Scripture

Scripture is not merely man's attempt to record God's revelation. Since it was written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it is divine as well as human in character. The words of our Lord, the prophets and the apostles which are written in Scripture have the same authority as their spoken words. The history, doctrine and ethics of Scripture are the truth of God, who can neither err nor deceive. This truth was given to guide fallen humanity out of darkness into light. Tradition, the teaching church and the human understanding all have a part to play in transmitting and applying the teaching of Scripture, but whenever they assert themselves against it they go utterly astray.

(e) The Interpretation of Scripture

Since Scripture was written in human language, at particular junctures in history, it has a linguistic and historical background against which it must be understood. In this it is like any other literature. However, since Scripture was also written by divine inspiration, it has a unity and consistency which allows one part to be interpreted by another. In this it is unlike any other literature. It is the Holy Spirit who enables a man to understand Scripture, and the Holy Spirit has been at work in the hearts of a multitude of men in every generation. What others claim to have learned from Scripture must be tested by Scripture but must not be despised: it is by building on the labours of earlier interpreters that the church makes progress in the understanding of Scripture. The Trinitarian and Christological definitions of the early church and the reformation teaching on authority and salvation have thus a permanent importance.

(f) Grace and Faith

Grace is not a quasi-physical substance but is the personal favour and goodness of God to man. Faith is not mere intellectual belief but is trust, and trust in God involves belief of what he says. Since God speaks to us in Scripture about our salvation, to trust him is both to believe that our sins are already atoned for through the cross of Christ, and to rely on him to accept us, preserve us, perfect us and glorify us for that reason.

(g) The Grounds of Justification

The fact that believers are reckoned righteous by God on account of their faith does not mean that faith is a meritorious work. Faith comes from God and is pleasing to God, but the sole grounds of justification are the atonement of Christ on the cross, of which faith lays hold. Nor do the grounds

of justification ever change. Though faith ‘works by love’, these good works are not the grounds of justification any more than faith itself is. Rather, they are proof that faith is living and true.

(h) Universalism

The idea of universal salvation, against which Article 18 contends, still persists. But in fact the awful truth is abundantly clear from Scripture that not all men will be saved. It is also clear that non-Christian religions are to be regarded not so much as strivings towards the truth but rather as strivings against it: Judaism, and to some extent Islam, are special cases in that they are influenced by biblical revelation, but non-Christian religions in general are to be regarded as arising from a sinful perversion of natural revelation. No limits can be set to the dealings of the merciful God with individuals, even within non-Christian religions, but supernatural revelation sets forth Jesus Christ as the only Saviour from sin, and charges the church to preach this gospel throughout the world as man’s one hope in this world and the next. Dialogue with representatives of other faiths can assist in the removal of misunderstanding, but is no substitute for evangelism, and ‘multi-faith services’ are a form of syncretism, abhorrent to the one true God.

(i) The Day of Salvation

The opportunity to repent and believe the gospel is limited to this present life, for men are to be judged by God according to the works done in the flesh, and to die in one’s sins is to die without God and without hope. Those who die without the knowledge of the gospel will be judged by their response to such knowledge of God’s will as they had by nature. To hold out the false hope of a second chance after death is to discourage repentance and to discourage evangelism while the opportunity for them exists. To pray that those who died unrepentant should repent and be saved after death is to ask what God cannot grant. Intercession for the dead is a practice which has no direct support from Scripture, and even when it is concerned with departed Christians, it often takes forms which imply either errors like purgatory or speculations like progress in grace between death and resurrection. As intercession for the dead is so liable to misunderstanding and abuse, the prudent course in public worship is for the church to content itself with giving thanks for those who died in faith and praying for the living.