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THE THIRTY NINE ARTICLES

A FAITH FOR TODAY (13) ARTICLES FOR TODAY (PART 2)

Donald Allister

Concluding the final part of Donald Allister's series on the Thirty-nine Articles this continues from Articles for Today (Part 1) printed in the previous edition of Cross†Way.

(j) The Church Invisible and Visible

The one universal church of God has two aspects, visible and invisible, but is not two churches. It is invisible in that God alone knows those whom he has chosen and whose repentance and faith are sincere. It is visible in that the public ministry of the word and sacraments, for which local congregations or churches gather, are visible. When a man repents and believes, which normally occurs through the witness of the church, he is thereby joined to the church invisible, and it becomes his right and duty to join the church visible, or to confirm his existing membership of it.

(k) The Unity of the Church

The smallest unit of the church is the Christian family and the next in size is the local congregation, which binds together the Christian families and the Christian members of non-Christian families in a particular locality. However, all the congregations of the universal church have the same word and sacraments, believe in the same Lord and Saviour, and are inhabited by the same Holy Spirit, so fellowship and co-operation should not be limited to the local congregation. Still less should this be so where orthodox congregations of different polities exist in the same locality. Since episcopacy, presbyterianism, independency, infant baptism and believers' baptism are none of them unmistakably commanded by Scripture, they ought to be no obstacle to the mutual recognition of ministries and sacraments, to close co-operation in Christian worship and witness, or to fellowship at the Lord's Table, even when it is not expedient to join in a single congregation. On the other hand, where there are fundamental differences of doctrine, close fellowship must wait until they have been resolved.

(l) The Christian Ministry

In the New Testament, ministry is as manifold as are spiritual gifts, but there already exists within it an institutional ministry, to which outward appointment by the church is required, and not just an inward call from God. Presbyter-bishops, similar to the elders of the Jewish synagogue, were normal in the apostolic churches, sometimes assisted by deacons, and it is from these that the bishops, presbyters and deacons of later Christendom developed. The main tasks of the presbyter-bishops were teaching and pastoral oversight, not the administration of sacraments. The name 'priest' for presbyters was retained at the Reformation only because it is etymologically a short form of 'presbyter', not in a sacrificial sense.

(m) The Ministry of Women

Women played an active part in the apostolic church, and it may be that female deacons are found in the New Testament, though female presbyters are not. The distinction is significant, because the diaconate did not until long after the first century become a first step to the presbyterate, and the presbyter has an office of authority (shown both by his title, which means 'senior man', and by the references to presbyters 'ruling'). St Paul teaches that the relation of headship and subordination between male and female sexes goes back to the very creation, and should be observed both in the Christian family and in the Christian congregation. Though the church ought to set an example to

the world, and not to follow the world's example, women set over men in civil society should be duly respected, since 'the powers that be are ordained of God'.

(n) Christian Initiation

The New Testament attributes regeneration, the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit not simply to baptism but also to the word (or to faith, which is evoked by the word). Initiation, therefore, is not completed by infant baptism except in sacramental terms. On the other hand, the laying on of hands, which is not clearly commanded in the New Testament, is no necessary part of initiation: the only element in confirmation which is necessary is the candidate's personal response of faith to his instruction in God's word. Though, in the case of adults, reception of Holy Communion closely followed baptism in New Testament times, it is not an integral part of initiation.

(o) The Eucharistic Sacrifice

The Holy Communion is nowhere described in Scripture as a sacrifice. The nearest the New Testament comes to this is by describing it as a feast upon Christ's sacrifice, and this is a sacrifice which any member of the priestly people of God may offer, in private or in public. The idea that the eucharist is a ritual sacrifice offered by a ministerial priesthood is therefore quite foreign to the New Testament, as is ceremonial suggestive of such an idea, and when the further idea is added that this ritual sacrifice is identical with Christ's sacrifice on the cross, or with some heavenly sacrifice of equal or greater importance, the very foundations of Christianity are being overturned, and the language of Article 31, 'blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits', becomes appropriate.

(p) Christian Maturity

That love fulfils the Law does not mean that love can do without God's Love. Without the Law, love is blind. Love is the spirit in which God's Law is gladly obeyed. The restatements and reinterpretations of the Old Testament Law which we find in the gospels and epistles of the New Testament are therefore essentials of Christian morality. To relativize them in the manner of 'situation ethics' can only contribute further to the moral decadence which already exists. Whereas to take them at their face value, and to teach and live accordingly, will do more than anything else could to re-establish personal and social morality in the church and in the nation.

(q) Comprehensiveness and Discipline

The due order of the church visible requires that it should receive those whom the Lord has received, not excluding any for trivial reasons, but also that it should check those of its members who openly practise wickedness or teach fundamental error. The Church of England has aimed to maintain this proper balance, not with entire success, as the separate existence of the Free Churches bears witness. The disciplinary Articles which conclude the 39 occasionally exalt probable opinions into certainties, and the uniformity which the 1662 Prayer Book requires in matters of indifference has proved too rigid for the consciences of some. Nevertheless, the fundamental departures from the biblical teaching of the doctrinal Articles and the Creeds and from Reformation principles of worship which have been witnessed since the beginning of the eighteenth century are a scandalous disorder, which theological ferment and decay of discipline explain but cannot justify. The restoration of a firm but loving discipline is something for which Christians should work and pray.

Roger Beckwith has put his finger on many issues which the contemporary church needs to address, or on which the Thirty-nine Articles could be misunderstood today. Here are some of them.

God, Revelation and the Bible (a)-(e)

Some say that Article 1 offers a cold theology, with God devoid of feeling: but the Article refers to God's wisdom and goodness. Those who, like Bishop John Robinson in *Honest to God*, lay too

much stress on God being with us and in us, forget that if he is God he must be separate from his creation. Although God is separate from creation, he is involved with it, both in controlling history and in revealing himself in Jesus Christ and in the Bible. We need the Bible and must submit to its teaching rather than trying to re-interpret it.

Salvation (f) (i)

Several errors are dealt with here: the idea that grace is 'something' we can receive through a priestly act or a sacrament, the idea that faith is our 'good work' by which we are saved; the idea that all will go to heaven; the idea that it will be possible to turn to God after death, or that it is appropriate to pray for the dead.

Church and Ministry (j) (m)

The church, its unity and ministry, are at the heart of ecumenical and other debates. Some say that the visible church is ruled by men and the invisible by God. Beckwith points out that they are one and the same. He argues for unity between congregations which differ on secondary issues, but not where there are fundamental differences of doctrine. He stresses, against Roman and anglo-Catholicism, that teaching and pastoral oversight are the main jobs of the clergy, and that oversight in family and church ought to be male.

Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Communion (n) (o)

Some say that baptism makes you a Christian, that confirmation is essential for church membership and receiving Communion, and that Communion is a sacrifice by which we please God. We see from the New Testament that this is wrong: baptism must be accompanied or followed by faith, confirmation has its place but is not essential, Holy Communion must not be thought of or presented as a sacrifice.

Morality and Discipline (p) (q)

'Situation ethics' is the technique which allows people to claim that any behaviour is acceptable so long as it is motivated by love. Too often the church allows immorality or heresy; there must be firm but loving discipline in the church.