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The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion

A MODERN PARAPHRASE

BY JOHN BICKERSTETH AND GEOFFREY COX

Introduction

THE Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion printed at the end of the Book of Common Prayer seem at present to be little used. Reasons for this are not difficult to find : some are clearly out of date, or irrelevant ; others support doctrines which are now unpopular ; and all are phrased in language which is three centuries or more old, without enjoying the general familiarity which makes much of the rest of the Prayer Book widely understandable in spite of its age. There has been talk of revising the Articles : but it has also been suggested that the need for such confessions of faith has largely disappeared in an age of theological liberalism. This paraphrase is a modest attempt to show that the Articles could have an extremely valuable part to play in the future life of the Church if their potentialities were fully realized.

It might be argued that the Articles, ideally, have three main functions. Firstly, to set out and conserve the general doctrinal position of the Church of England, and to provide its authorized rule of faith. Secondly, to ensure, by means of clerical subscription or otherwise, that certain limits are set to what may properly be preached or taught within the Church. Thirdly, to assist all members of the Church of England to grasp the main conclusions of orthodox theological thought. In regard to the latter, we have ourselves used this version with real profit in parish study groups, and we believe that revised Articles of this kind could well supplement the Catechism in providing a basis for post-Confirmation instruction in Young People's Fellowships and doctrinal study courses for adult church members.

This is not primarily the work of scholars, but of parish clergy ; it aims to put into words which can be more widely understood what the Articles actually say or imply at present. It may thus help to focus thought on any alterations which may be thought necessary if the Articles are again to command respect as the authoritative rule of faith for the Church of England. Some of our own tentative suggestions for revision are appended to the version.

1. *The Holy Trinity*

There is one living God, true and eternal, a pure spiritual being, an unchanging unity ; of unlimited power, wisdom, and goodness ; the maker and preserver of all things. In this God there are three Persons, one in nature, power, and eternity : the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

2. *The Person and Work of Christ*

God the Son, who is the Word of the Father, Himself from all eternity true God and Son of the Father, took man's true nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin : so that two whole and perfect natures, that is of God and of man, were joined together permanently as one

Person ; one Christ, God and man. He truly suffered and was crucified, died and was buried, to reconcile His Father to us, and to be a sacrifice, not only for the original guilt, but also for all actual sins of men.

3. *Christ's Experience of Death*

As Christ died for us and was buried, so also is it to be believed that He went into Hades.

4. *The Resurrection of Christ*

Christ truly rose again from the dead, and took again His human body in all the perfection of its manhood ; and thus ascended into heaven and is there seated, until He returns to judge all men at the last day.

5. *The Holy Spirit*

The Holy Spirit, issuing from the Father and the Son, is of one nature, majesty, and glory with the Father and the Son, truly God for ever.

6. *The Sufficiency of the Bible for Salvation*

The Bible contains everything necessary for salvation, and only what it teaches or implies should be taught and believed as part of the Faith.

7. *The Old Testament*

The Old Testament does not contradict the New : for in both eternal life is offered to mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and man, being Himself both God and man. The law given by God through Moses is not binding on Christians as far as ceremonial is concerned, nor are its provisions for the nation necessarily binding on modern governments ; but all Christians must obey the commands which refer to right and wrong doing.

8. *The Creeds*

The three Creeds, called the Nicene, the Athanasian, and the Apostles', ought to be believed wholeheartedly, for they are based on the unmistakable teaching of the Bible.

9. *"Original" Sin*

Original Sin involves more than just following Adam's example. It is an inherited inclination towards wrong, producing inner conflict and incurring God's condemnation. Those who have received new life still retain this sinful tendency, which affects every aspect of their personality and draws them away from obedience to God.

This inclination remains sinful, although forgiven to those who believe and are baptized.

10. *The Need of Grace*

Since the fall of Adam man has had no power of his own to believe or turn to God. Thus we cannot do anything good or pleasing to God unless He first transforms our wills, and then works with us as we use them.

11. *Justification*

We are accepted by God not for anything we have deserved or done, but only through faith in the saving work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

To say then, that we are justified through faith alone is most wholesome and comforting, and this is usefully enlarged on in the Homily "Of the Salvation of all Mankind".

12. *Good Works*

The good done by a Christian as a result of justification cannot atone for his sins nor help him to escape the judgment of God ; but is pleasing and acceptable to God for Christ's sake, and provides an unmistakeable proof of the reality of his faith.

13. *Before Justification*

What a man does before justification does not spring from faith in Christ, and therefore cannot qualify him for grace nor help him to deserve it. It is thus unacceptable to God, and must be classified as sinful because it does not fulfil God's will and commandments, and is not done to the glory of God.

14. *Works of Supererogation*

Christ says plainly, " When you have done all that is commanded you say, ' We are unprofitable servants ' ".

No one should presume, therefore, to speak of " works of supererogation ", implying that we can, in any sense, offer to God more than our duty requires.

15. *Christ alone sinless*

Christ became a real man in every way, but He was wholly without sin in thought and deed. He came as an unblemished Lamb to take away the sins of the world by one decisive sacrifice of Himself : as St. John says, " there is no sin in Him ". We, on the other hand, although baptized and born again in Christ, still offend in many ways ; " and if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us ".

16. *Sin after Baptism*

Sin deliberately committed after baptism is not necessarily the unpardonable sin against the Holy Spirit, and repentance must not be excluded. After we have received the Holy Spirit we may depart from grace given, and fall into sin, and by the grace of God we may rise again, and amend our lives. Thus the teaching is to be rejected which claims that Christians no longer sin, and which denies forgiveness to any who truly repent.

17. *Predestination and Election*

Predestination to life is God's unchanging purpose : that is to say, unknown to us from eternity. He has been working out the salvation of those He has chosen in Christ, to deliver them from final condemnation, and to bring them through Christ to the eternal life for which He has fitted them. Those who are highly favoured in this way are first called in God's good time by the working of His Holy Spirit ; through grace they obey this call ; they are freely justified ; they are adopted as God's children ; they are changed into the likeness of His only Son Jesus Christ ; they live godly lives ; and finally, by God's mercy, obtain everlasting happiness.

The consideration of this doctrine is full of comfort to those who are aware that God's Spirit is at work in them, the Spirit who turns them away from mere material concerns and raises their minds to more important spiritual interests. It establishes and confirms their assurance of enjoying everlasting salvation through Christ and increases

their love of God. On the other hand, the frequent declaration of God's predestination can have a most dangerous effect on those who are not Christians, since the devil may use it to drive them either into despair or into worse expressions of vice. We must accept God's promises in the Bible in their plain meaning, and always obey that will of God which is clearly revealed in His Word.

18. *Salvation only through Christ*

Those who presume to say that a man may be saved so long as he is sincere in attempting to live up to his convictions, are under the curse of God, as pronounced by St. Paul.

Holy Scripture teaches that we may only be saved through the Name of Jesus Christ.

19. *The Church*

The "visible" Church of Christ is a congregation of believers, in which the pure Word of God is preached and the sacraments are administered in all essential respects as Christ directed.

The Churches of Jerusalem, Alexandria and Antioch have fallen into error; and so has the Church of Rome, not only in the Christian life, and in the conduct of public worship, but also in doctrine.

20. *The Authority of the Church*

The Church may devise and authorize forms of public worship, and settle doctrinal disputes; but it may not make directions which conflict with God's written Word, nor interpret one part of Scripture at variance with another. As a witness and guardian of the Bible, the Church must neither contradict it, nor impose any additional dogmas as essential for salvation.

21. *The Authority of General Councils*

General Councils may only be convened by order of the governments concerned; and since they are composed of fallible men who may not all be controlled by the Spirit of God and His Word, they may make mistakes even in matters of doctrine—as indeed history confirms. For this reason what they decree as to the essentials of salvation is not binding unless it can be proved from the Bible.

22. *Roman Catholic Doctrines*

Roman Catholic doctrines which concern "purgatory", "pardons", and the worship of images and relics, and also praying for "saints", are foolish human inventions which have no basis in Scripture but are only condemned by it.

23. *Public Ministry*

No one may presume to preach or administer the sacraments without being properly called and authorized by those appointed to do so.

24. *Language to be used in Public Worship*

According to the Word of God, and the practice of the early Church, public worship is to be in the language of the people.

25. *The Sacraments*

The sacraments appointed by Christ are not only badges or tokens of the Christian's profession of faith, but are effective guarantees and expositions of God's favour and goodness towards us. He works in us

secretly by them and vitally strengthens and confirms our faith in Him.

There are two sacraments appointed by Christ our Lord in the Gospel, that is to say, baptism and the Lord's supper. Those five so-called sacraments (confirmation, penance, orders, matrimony, and extreme unction) should not be regarded as sacraments of the Gospel, for they have either arisen through a misunderstanding of the teaching of the Apostles or else they are simply situations allowed in the Bible. These are not sacraments like baptism and the Lord's supper, for they have no visible sign or ceremony appointed by God. Christ did not appoint sacraments to be gazed at, or carried about, but rather used. They are beneficial only to those who receive them rightly : and, as St. Paul says, those who use them unworthily only incur judgment.

26. *Unworthy Ministers*

The "visible" Church contains bad men as well as good, and sometimes the bad occupy leading positions in its service. Nonetheless we may use their ministry, both of Word and sacraments, because they officiate in Christ's name and not their own, and by His commission and authority. The value of the sacraments is not lessened by the character of evil ministers, but depends on Christ's gracious institution and promises, and corresponding obedience and faith on the part of the recipients.

For the sake of the Church's discipline, however, inquiries should be made concerning evil ministers, and their offences faithfully reported ; so that, if duly found guilty, they may be dismissed from their offices.

27. *Baptism*

Baptism is not only a sign of the Christian's profession of faith and a mark which distinguishes him from others, but it is a sign of regeneration : those who receive it rightly are brought into the church.

In baptism the promises of the forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Spirit, are visibly signed and sealed : faith is confirmed and grace increased as a result of prayer to God. The baptism of young children should be retained in the Church as this accords well with Christ's teaching.

28. *The Lord's Supper*

The Lord's supper is not simply a sign of mutual love between Christians, but rather a sacrament of our redemption through Christ's death. Those who receive it rightly, worthily, and with faith, feed on the body of Christ, through the breaking of bread, and drink the blood of Christ, through the cup of blessing.

"Transubstantiation" (the teaching that the bread and wine themselves are changed) cannot be proved from the Bible : but is contrary to the plain words of Scripture, destroys the whole conception of a sacrament, and has given rise to many superstitions.

The body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten in the supper only in a spiritual manner, and the means by which it is received is faith.

The Lord's supper was not instituted by Christ to be reserved, carried about, elevated, or worshipped.

29. *Misuse of the Lord's Supper*

Although those who have no living faith may eat and drink the bread

and wine, they do not by this share in Christ, but are guilty of misusing such holy things.

30. *Use of both Bread and Wine*

In accordance with Christ's command, both parts of the Lord's Supper, the bread and the wine alike, are to be administered to all Christian people.

31. *Christ's finished Work on the Cross*

Christ's offering, once for all, provides the perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual, and there is no other atonement for sin.

The sacrifices of the mass, in which it was said that the priest offered Christ to gain remission of punishment or guilt for the living and the dead, were thus blasphemous, misleading, and spiritually dangerous.

32. *Marriage of the Clergy*

The clergy are not commanded by God's law to remain single : but may marry, like all other Christians, if they think it helpful to godliness.

33. *Excommunication*

Anyone who is publicly and lawfully excommunicated must be treated as such by the whole Church, until he has repented, and been re-admitted into the fellowship by the appropriate authority.

34. *Church Traditions*

So long as nothing is ordered against God's Word, it is not right to expect uniformity of tradition and ceremony throughout the Church, since each may vary with temperament, climate, and other factors.

Every particular or national church has authority, for its own well-being, to order, change, or abolish such ceremonies or rites ; but should any through his private judgment wilfully break with such, and cause distress in the congregation, he is to be publicly rebuked (as a deterrent to others) as offending against the common order.

35. *The Homilies*

The two Books of Homilies contain godly and wholesome teaching, and may be read in Church from time to time in place of the sermon, and otherwise used for instruction.

36. *Consecrations and Ordinations*

The Book of Consecration of Archbishops and Bishops, and ordering of Priests and Deacons, published in the time of Edward the Sixth, and confirmed at the same time by authority of Parliament, contains all things necessary to such consecration and ordering ; neither has it anything superstitious or ungodly. Therefore, whoever are consecrated or ordered according to the rites of that Book from that time onwards are rightly, orderly, and lawfully consecrated and ordered.

37. *Civil Authority*

The Crown has supreme authority in the United Kingdom and its other dominions and is not subject to foreign jurisdiction.

That is to say, it is responsible, not for the ministry of God's Word and sacraments, as Queen Elizabeth's " Injunctions " make clear ;

but rather, as is seen in Holy Scripture, for the just rule of all committed to its charge and the restraint of evil.

The Bishop of Rome has no authority in the United Kingdom.

The laws of this country may punish its citizens with death for particularly serious offences.

Christians are at liberty to fight for their country.

38. Possessions

The possessions of Christians are not held in common ownership ; but everyone must give all he can afford to those in need.

39. Oaths

Swearing is forbidden in the Bible, but the oaths required for legal purposes may be taken conscientiously by Christians on the same authority.

Some Suggested Revisions

Any suggestion for a revision of a confession of faith must settle for one of two possible alternatives : either a small-scale tidying-up, leaving the general framework substantially intact, or a complete overhaul and re-organization which will have only doctrinal links with the previous standard and the truth. Few will be competent, nor is the present doctrinal interest within the Church of England sufficient, to attempt the second task. These comments are therefore merely a *ballon d'essai* of the first alternative, questioning possible weaknesses in the Articles in relation to the present theological situations under the headings of re-organization and regrouping, inadequacies, additions, and excisions.

(It must be emphasized that all that follows is only tentative and provisional and that the writers will gratefully receive and study any comments received.)

It will clarify matters to show the main grouping of the Articles under the standard headings of all the Reformed Confessions :

GOD, His Nature (1) and His Decrees (17)

AUTHORITY, Scripture (6), the Old Testament (7), the Creeds (8), the Church (20), Tradition (34), the Homilies (35)

SIN, " Original " (9), Continuing (15), after baptism (16)

MAN, His Need of grace (10), " Good Works " (12, 13, 14)

CHRIST, His PERSON (2a, 3, 4)

His WORK (2b, 11, 15, 18, 31a)

HOLY SPIRIT (5)

CHURCH (19), and MINISTRY (23, 26, 32, 33), Ordinal (36)

SACRAMENTS (25), Baptism (27), the Lord's Supper (28), its details (29, 30)

CONTROVERSIAL, against Rome (21, 22, 24, 31)

against Anabaptists (37, 38, 39)

This is of course only a rough division since some articles cover more than one subject, and some subjects overlap the divisions.

Re-organization and re-grouping. Although the order may differ formally from that of other of the Reformed Confessions, most of the main subjects are mentioned. However, in the cause of clarity and ease of reference some articles could well be joined together—for example, 2a, 3, and 4 on the Person of Christ, 2b, 11, 15, 18, and 31a on the Work of Christ. 12-14 could well be covered by one on " Good Works ". 15 and 16 would be better together, while 29 would fit more happily under " The Lord's Supper ", and 31 would split as indicated.

When we set the articles out under headings, the *Inadequacies* become visible. There is nothing on the Work of God in Creation, and little on Christ's heavenly Session, possibly important against mistaken ideas of a continual sacrificial offering. Much more needs to be said about the Work of the Holy Spirit, both in revelation—as the source of God's Word and continuing guide and expositor—and in His gifts for the continuing life of the Church, tongues, healing, etc. The doctrine of the Church, too, needs further definition, as does that of the Ministry, while no mention is made of Eschatology. Present-day developments probably require some reference to Stewardship, and to the Anglican Communion and the Ecumenical Movement, while 33 on Excommunication might well be revised as General Discipline, and 37 on Civil Authority couched in more positive terms.

As to *Excision*, references to the Apocrypha might well go, as might 14 on Supererogation, and 21 on General Councils—no biting issue today. The Marriage of the Clergy (32) is little canvassed, and the questions of " communism " (38) and " oaths " (39) were particularly concerned with the Anabaptists. Similarly open to question are the references to the churches of Alexandria, etc., in 19, and some maintain that in Article 3 the descent into Hades should either be expanded or else excised. Other possibilities will depend on individual circumstances, but if we are subject to Scripture we will be ready both to excise and to add so that our confession of faith will be in all things in accordance with the Word and to the sole glory of God.