

A FAITH FOR TODAY

A COMMENTARY ON

THE 39 ARTICLES

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1) Introducing the Thirty-nine Articles

Many churchgoers have heard of the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion but few know much about them. Older church members may remember that new clergy used to have to read the Articles in full on their first Sunday in a parish (often they replaced the sermon). Those who have been to an ordination or induction recently may have heard the bishop asking the candidate if he accepts the Thirty-nine Articles as bearing witness to God's truth.

Who wrote them? Where are they to be found? Why are they so important to the Church of England? What do they say? Are they at all relevant today? Those are the questions I hope to answer in this series. In this introduction we will look at the background to the Articles. Then in the following chapters we will look in some detail at what the Articles actually say and how they apply in today's world.

You can find the Articles of Religion at the back of the Book of Common Prayer. They were not included in the Alternative Service Book 1980, as that book was designed to go alongside, not to replace, the older prayer book. Their wording is in places old-fashioned but they can still be understood with some effort. Where I think it will help, I have rendered them into slightly more modern English for the purposes of these studies.

Historical background

A number of serious controversies arose between the European and English Church in the sixteenth century and various attempts were made to reach agreement, to define what Christians should believe and how they should behave. 1536 saw the publication of Ten Articles, a compromise statement designed to avoid the looming splits in the church. In 1539 Henry VIII brought in Six Articles, trying to stop the growth of the new reformed faith.

In 1552 the Reformers had produced and published Forty-two Articles, largely the work of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury and Nicholas Ridley, Bishop of London. These attempted to avoid serious controversy, to establish real unity among believers and to deal with various extremes in the church. The Forty-two Articles were revised into thirty-nine by the Convocations of 1563 and 1571. They have been unchanged since then, forming part of the official teaching of the Church of England. Since 1865 all clergy have had to subscribe to the Thirty-nine Articles.

Compromise teaching?

The Articles are often mistakenly thought of as a compromise between the medieval catholicism of Rome and the Calvinism of Geneva. In fact they stand definitely and clearly with the Reformers of Germany and Geneva, and against the Roman teachings defined at the Council of Trent (1545-63). They were seen by Rome, and by the reformed churches, as placing the Church of England firmly within the ranks of the Protestant Reformation. It is only a minority of Anglicans, with decided leanings to Rome, who have tried (unsuccessfully) to claim the Articles as speaking for such a compromise.

But in some ways they are a compromise, or middle way, between different views in the sixteenth century church. We will see this in more detail later in the series but for now, here are five areas where they attempt to make peace, not by ‘fudging’ the issues but by stating truth clearly and rejecting extremes on both sides:-

1. The Articles challenge both Roman and anabaptist error (the anabaptists were at the extreme wing of the Reformation, much as the house churches and some charismatics can now be seen as extreme evangelicals). Many of the false teachings dealt with in the Articles are still much in evidence today in Anglicanism, catholicism and nonconformity.
2. They reject both Arminian and hyper-calvinist teaching. Arminians believe that we can contribute to our own salvation in various ways; they reject God’s free grace and predestination out of hand. Hyper-calvinists take the biblical emphasis on predestination but twist it to say that you should not try to persuade people to believe in case they are not among the Elect. The Articles insist that the doctrine of predestination and election is helpful for promoting assurance in believers but dangerous and not to be dwelt upon to unbelievers.
3. The Thirty-nine Articles insist on the one hand (with Rome and against the anabaptists) that the church, its councils and its rites and ceremonies have real authority and validity. But they stress (against Rome and with the anabaptists) that the church is prone to err and must always remain under the authority of Scripture.
4. They teach that sacraments are not just empty signs (as extreme Reformers said and still say) but are truly effectual. But they make plain that there is nothing automatic in the way sacraments work (despite the still unchanged Roman view).
5. They challenge the Roman teaching that the Pope has authority over civil rulers but equally they stand against the anabaptist view that civil rulers have no authority over Christians.

The role of doctrine

The Articles are statements of doctrine and doctrine is not popular these days. But it is important. Scripture contains so much teaching that it can be hard to see its overall message and how its parts fit together. Doctrine is the church’s God-given tool to help us understand it. If we compare Scripture to the countryside, with its amazing variety of life, doctrine is like a cultivated garden, bringing together in order many different varieties. The gardener helps us to appreciate the magnificence of nature but despite the beauty of gardens nobody pretends that they are the real thing. The garden serves nature by systematizing it, so we can study and enjoy it better. Doctrine serves God’s revelation by setting it out under various headings and themes.

Of course doctrine must be constantly reviewed in the light of what we learn from Scripture. We must revise it if it conflicts with the Bible. It is thus more like a loose leaf book than a bound volume. The Articles do not have the same status as Scripture. They are a tool, and an important one, to help us understand what God has said.

(2) ARTICLES 1-5: God

Article 1. Faith in the Holy Trinity

Article 2. The Word, or Son of God, who became truly Man

Article 3. The descent of Christ into Hades

Article 4. The Resurrection of Christ

Article 5. The Holy Spirit

The Articles do not claim to be a complete compendium of Christian beliefs. They give us a superb outline of the main themes and they deal with areas of disagreement or heresy current when they were written. Most of them are still current today. If you follow doctrinal matters, it may not surprise you to hear that the nature of God, the person and work of Christ, and the Holy Spirit, were all subjects argued about in the sixteenth century church. Very little changes!

God the Holy Trinity

Article 1 is a brilliantly concise statement of a complicated but thoroughly biblical truth. It teaches us that there is only one God, that he is alive and true (trustworthy), that he is eternal (without beginning or end), and that he is ‘without body, parts or passions’ (not able to be affected or changed by anything we can do). It insists that he alone made and upholds all that exists, in the spiritual world as well as the physical; no room here for the dualism that makes the devil some sort of opposite and equal force with whom God has constantly to do battle. And, while insisting on God’s oneness, the Article teaches of the three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All are personal, all are God, all are of the same ‘substance’ (kind), all are eternal (no room here for the idea that the Son only began to exist in the earthly life of Jesus) but they are one. They are not three parts of one God, because God is without parts. Each one is fully God, but together they are one God.

I have mentioned a few of the errors that often crop up when people think or talk about God. These are important in practice, in that wrong understanding here can affect our whole relationship with God, our salvation, our confidence in him, our hope for the future. There is no space here to go into all these points in detail, so we will simply focus on the way in which each person of the Trinity is fully God.

It is so easy for committed Christians to think of Jesus as quite distinct from the Father (kind as opposed to the Father’s sternness, or approachable as opposed to the Father’s inaccessibility). But Jesus himself tells us, ‘I and the Father are one’ (John 10:30) and ‘Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father’ (John 14:9). It is easy for us to think of the Spirit as impersonal, more of a force than a being. But Jesus tells us, ‘You know him, for he lives with you and will be in you’ (John 14: 17). We are tempted to think of the Spirit as very different from Jesus himself, but Jesus, talking about the coming of the Spirit to believers, says, ‘On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you’ (John 14:20). And of the believer receiving the Spirit he adds, ‘My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him’ (John 14:23). In other words, where we see Jesus we see the Father, where the Spirit is, there is

God in all His fullness. St Paul has the same idea, because he uses the phrases ‘Spirit of God’, ‘Spirit of Christ’, ‘Spirit’ and ‘Christ’ interchangeably (e.g. Romans 8: 9-10).

The Person of Christ

Who is Jesus? Is he both man and God, and if so, how can those be held together? Throughout church history, including both the sixteenth century and today, people have come out with some very odd ideas about this. The Bible is clear in its teaching that Jesus is both fully man and fully God but assorted heretics have tried to deny this by making him half man, half God; or man until his baptism, then God; or man until his resurrection, then God.

Articles 2-4 insist on holding together the various biblical teachings. From eternity the Son of God (called ‘the Word’ in John’s gospel) has been one with God. He did not have a beginning at some point in time but has always been. In Mary’s womb he took flesh and human nature upon himself, joining together full Godhead and complete manhood in one person: Jesus Christ. Taking Mary’s substance is important: Jesus was not ‘pretend man’, God impersonating man, but fully man. As such he died, was buried, descended to Hades (the ‘place of the dead’ in ancient language - not hell as the English prayer book wrongly translates the original Latin of the Articles). And he rose from the dead as a complete man, taking the fullness of human nature into heaven, where he remains as both man and God, as Lord and Judge, until he comes again.

The Work of Christ

The same three Articles, 2-4, also deal with the work of Christ on the cross for us. One important point is that his death was ‘to reconcile the Father to us’. The cross does not change us into the sort of people God can accept and forgive. There is nothing in us which is or can be acceptable to him. The cross has the astonishing power to change God’s attitude to us. It placates his wrath, or (in older language) propitiates his anger. Another lesson here is that Jesus’ death is sufficient and effective for actual sins as well as for our guilt and sinfulness inherited from Adam. Some teachers said (and say) that the cross makes it possible for God to forgive us, by dealing with original sin: but we still need to atone for (deal with) actual sins we have committed. The Articles, like the Bible, will have none of that. Christ’s death is a perfect, sufficient and complete sacrifice for all the sins of his people. Thank God for that!

The Holy Spirit

One of the main differences between the eastern churches (nowadays including Greek and Russian Orthodox) and the western, going back hundreds of years before the Reformation, was the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Article 5 keeps the Church of England firmly within the western camp by insisting that the Spirit ‘proceeds from the Father and Son’. The eastern Christians omit the phrase ‘from the Son’ from their creeds and statements, as they believe the Spirit is a gift from the Father alone. Jesus does say that the Father will send the Spirit (John 14:16, 26) but he also talks of ‘the Counsellor ... whom I will send to you from the Father’ (John 15: 26). It does seem that the eastern churches drive too hard a wedge between Jesus and the Father.

Article 5 also insists that the Spirit is fully God and shares in the substance, majesty and glory of the Father and the Son. That includes the fact that he is personal, knowable, hard on sin and a friend of sinners.

(3) ARTICLES 6-8, SCRIPTURE AND TRUTH

The Articles are very clear on the importance and the nature of the Bible and on how Scripture relates to other statements of faith.

The Sufficiency of Scripture

The first sentence of Article 6 encapsulates this essential reformation doctrine perfectly: ‘Holy Scripture contains all things necessary for salvation.’ This was (and remains) a direct attack on both Romanism and extreme or radical Protestantism. Rome claims that the church may define doctrines not described in Scripture and insists that they be accepted by those wanting to be saved; fairly recent examples are the teachings about the ‘immaculate conception’ and the ‘assumption’ of Mary, the mother of Jesus. In 1854 Pope Pius IX decreed that all Christians were to accept the idea that Mary, from the moment of her conception, was free from all sin, original or actual. In 1950 Pope Pius XII taught, again as an article of faith, that Mary did not die but was taken bodily straight to heaven. As long as doctrines like these remain part of official Roman Catholic teaching (which must be accepted in full by the faithful) it is hard to see how Rome and Protestantism can be reconciled. The doctrine of Scripture is at stake.

But extreme Protestants also add to what the Bible teaches. The insistence that speaking in tongues is a necessary sign of conversion, or that church leaders must be obeyed in all areas of life, or that the State has no rights over the Christian believer; these unfortunate aberrations have all been taught, and continue to be taught. In each case church leaders are setting themselves above Scripture.

But the truth of the sufficiency of Scripture is not just for the sake of defending the Faith against Catholic and Protestant extremists. It is a robust assertion of a glorious and comforting message, learnt by the Reformers at great cost to themselves. Even when the Church hides or distorts the message, the believer may go straight to the source, to God’s very voice, and hear for himself or herself. Even when the church or its leaders appear to be teaching rubbish or laying heavy burdens on us, our confidence in God and his salvation need not be shaken, because we do not depend on the Church or its leaders for salvation: we depend on God alone, saving by the power of his Word. Praise him for that!

Old and New Testaments

Articles 6 and 7 deal, from different angles, with the existence of Old and New Testaments in the Bible. The word ‘Testament’ can be misleading. It comes from the Latin translation of the Bible made by Erasmus in the early 1500s. ‘Covenant’ would be a better word in modern English, though the Articles suggest that the distinction between the parts of the Bible is unhelpful; it would be much better if we just had one Bible with sixty-six books and no blank page after the first thirty-nine. Article 7 has to make the point,

because it is so often forgotten or denied, that the Old Testament and the New do not contradict each other. How could God contradict himself? How can Christians say that he does? Both Testaments teach clearly that the only way of salvation is through the shedding of a substitute's blood, that there is no forgiveness unless the sin is punished in another, that God's promises of blessing through Abraham's seed, his giving of the Law and sacrificial system through Moses, and his establishing of a kingship in the line of David, are all eternal truths, pointing to the one way of salvation through God's Messiah.

Often the status of Old Testament law seems to be a problem for Christians. Article 7 follows the clear (and correct) teaching of Calvin and other Reformers, dividing the Law into its three component parts. The ritual law, outlining the sacrifices and ways of dealing with sin (foreshadowing the perfect sacrifice of the true Lamb of God), is fulfilled in Christ and therefore no longer applicable - though we can still learn from it. The civil law deals with the existence of Old Testament Israel as a theocracy, a nation-state under the direct rule of God; that no longer applies, since Israel as a nation came under judgment for its rejection of Christ; Christians nowadays are to live under the law of the country in which God sets them to live - but the Old Testament civil law can still provide useful examples of how people can live together in justice and peace. The moral law, that is the Ten Commandments and numerous other teachings to do with holiness of life, are a reflection of the character of God himself, and we break it at our peril.

The Roman church's insistence on accepting the Apocrypha as part of Scripture, despite the fact that it was written after the New Testament and is full of very dubious 'history', necessitated the Reformers' statement that the 'canonical' (genuine) books were those accepted by the Early Church. Our sixty-six books were all recognized as part of God's word during the first two centuries AD but the apocryphal books certainly were not. Rome decreed at the Council of Trent (1546) that anyone who did not accept the apocryphal books as sacred and canonical was anathematized; so much for the likes of me (and, I hope, you).

Creeds and Doctrinal Statements

Article 8 is very important for a number of reasons. The three creeds found in our Prayer Book are commended but not for their antiquity or the fact that the church has long accepted them. This is the difference between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. The only ground on which they are to be believed is that 'their contents may be proved by the definite statements of holy Scripture.'

This idea applies equally to all other doctrinal statements. The Articles dispute many official Roman teachings simply because they contradict, or cannot be proved by, the Bible. The Church of England only claims authority for the Articles themselves because they conform to Scripture. One of the chief tenets of biblical faith is that everything we do and say must be regularly submitted to the bar of Scripture. It is so easy to fall into the Roman trap of developing our own traditions, often good ones, then valuing them above all else. Especially is this so in strong denominations or strong local churches.

One of the most important issues facing Christians at the end of this century is the whole question of truth; what is true, how do we know, whether there can be one truth for some people and another for others, how much room is there for compromise on doctrinal matters - and so on. The Thirty-nine Articles are not absolute truth. But they are a very accurate compendium of Scripture teaching on the issues they deal with, and above all they insist that the only truth of which we can be sure is that given by God in His word. For this we need to stand and fight today, against those who want to compromise with unbelief or heresy, and against today's extreme Protestants who claim to hear the truth direct from God without needing the Bible.

(4) ARTICLES 9, 10, 11 AND 18: SIN AND SALVATION

There is other teaching in the Articles on sin and salvation, but these four Articles give a gloriously clear introduction to the biblical teaching, contrasting it with most of the misunderstandings and heresies of the sixteenth century and today.

Man's threefold problem

Put simply, man's problem consists of actual sin, original sin and the power of sin. Many heresies deny one or more of these aspects of the problem and the solution they offer is therefore inadequate. We need, with the Articles, to face up to what Scripture teaches.

Actual sin

Since sin is falling short of God's glory (Romans 3:23), we are all guilty. Even the 'good' person is only good by human standards but it is by God's standards that we are judged. The idea that doing our best will ensure we are safe at the judgment and the notion that God will weigh our good against our evil in the scales, are wrong and dangerous heresies. They are wrong because the standard required is perfect holiness and they are dangerous because they allow or encourage complacency instead of urging on people the need to be saved. Thus Article 11 denies that our good works or deservings can have any effect at all on our salvation, and Article 18 makes clear that doing our best is not enough (and rightly condemns those who teach that it is). Sin is sin and must be dealt with. We cannot deal with sin by pretending it is not there, or by hiding it away, or by balancing it out with good. It is read and it offends our holy God.

Original sin

But the problem is actually much deeper than actual sin. Original sin, a much misunderstood concept, is a very important Biblical truth which we must understand and take into account.

Augustine of Hippo (so called to distinguish him from Augustine of Canterbury) lived in North Africa around the year 400. Undoubtedly the greatest theologian since Paul (and the only post-Biblical one whose teachings we can really trust until the Reformation a thousand years later), he clarified the Biblical teaching on original sin. Pointing to Romans 5:12, he showed that Adam's sin affects us all: not just by example, or by spoiling the world for us but because we are united to Adam in a relationship which means

we share his guilt and his sinfulness. Original sin is a predisposition or tendency to sin, which we have all inherited from Adam. Even if we never commit an actual sin, still we are guilty because of our sinfulness. Put this way, the doctrine explains many otherwise difficult Bible passages (such as Genesis 8:21, Psalm 51:5, Matthew 7:11, Galatians 5:16-17).

Pelagianism (named after the British teacher and bishop's son Pelagius who also lived sixteen hundred years ago) is often called the English heresy; it is part of our national way of thinking. Pelagius taught that we are born without any predisposition to sin, free to choose good or evil; sin is caused by bad example or education. This denies original sin as a problem distinct from actual sin. Pelagianism was condemned by the popes and church councils of the early fifth century, and totally demolished by the teaching of Augustine of Hippo.

In the Middle Ages the Roman church developed the idea that original sin was an absence of righteousness or grace, not an evil in itself. Within each of us is a tiny spark of goodness which can be fanned into flame by a good example from outside, a good will from within, or particularly God's grace received through the sacraments. In this thinking, which is typical of Romanism and much Protestantism today, original sin ceases to be a problem, at least for the baptised.

But the sixteenth century Reformers went back to the teaching of Paul and Augustine, showing the errors and dangers of both Pelagius and Rome. Article 9 is vitally important, reminding us that we are, by our human nature, sinful - predisposed to sin. This human nature (often called 'the flesh' in older Bible versions) renders us subject to God's judgment. So even if we could live a life free from actual sin, we would be far from sinless and in no way able to avoid eternal condemnation. In practice, of course, we cannot avoid actual sin: both because we give in to external temptation and because our inner nature leads us astray.

The power of sin

I cannot count the number of times I have heard people talking about 'free will' as something we all have. When we are dealing with salvation from sin, free will makes no sense at all, as Article 10 points out. Who is free to go against his or her own nature? I may be free to put a comma or a full stop after this word, and to choose whether or not to commit a particular act of sin but I am not free (that is, able) to save myself by my own good deeds. Because of original sin and its allied curse original guilt, nothing I do can be wholly good because the heart or will from which such acts proceed is not wholly good; it is forever tainted by sin. To say that we are free to choose good or evil is true enough if we are just talking about actual sin but when original sin is taken into account we are not free at all: we are trapped by sin, enslaved to it and at its mercy.

God's complete solution

If the Articles are thorough in their treatment of sin, they are equally so in their doctrine of salvation. Since man's problem is so all-pervading, the answer to it must be

comprehensive. Indeed it is when we see the Scripture teaching, which is of full salvation. The Articles spell this out.

Dealing fully with sin

The doctrine of justification (Article 11) teaches that God has dealt with sin, punishing Christ for it on the cross of Calvary. We do not need to earn God's favour, because Christ has done so. We do not need to atone for our misdeeds, because Christ has done so. We do not need to be good to achieve salvation, because God accepts Christ's perfection instead. This is just as well, when we remember that we cannot do those things anyway. But so often we try, leading ourselves either into danger, if we kid ourselves that we are safe, or into despair, if we see the truth that we are not safe. Justification is a wholesome and comforting doctrine, because it faces the fact that I can do nothing to save myself and tells me that Christ has done all that is necessary!

Dealing fully with us

Not only has God dealt with my sin by justification. He has also dealt with me and continues to do so. He prepares us, accepts us and changes us. In Article 10 we read that 'the grace of God in Christ goes before us so that we may have a good will.' Even my first vague longings after God, my early gropings towards faith, are not my doing but the results of his work in me. The doctrine of justification teaches that for Christ's sake God accepts me as righteous and perfect. Article 10 goes on to describe the state of the redeemed Christian: now saved and forgiven but still depending on God to enable him to live a good life and grow in holiness (not that he needs to for salvation but now he wants to please his Lord).

This is important, not least because of the fact that even as a Christian I am afflicted by original sin, the tendency (shared with and inherited from Adam) to go astray and disobey God. Roman Catholicism teaches that baptism washes away original sin and many Protestants believe that re-birth or becoming a Christian somehow removes it. Not so. Article 9 is quite right to insist that 'this infection within man's nature persists even within those who are regenerate'. How else do I explain my inner struggle for righteousness? How else do we explain Paul's struggles so vividly depicted in Romans 7 and 8? The Bible truth is that in regeneration (new birth) original guilt is removed but sin remains, tormenting me but by God's grace driving me to Christ for continual cleansing and painful growth in holiness. But even here, it is Christ who is in control of my life - thank God!

Dealing fully with fallenness

Article 18 is a cause of offence to some. They see Bible-believing Christians as intolerant when we insist that Christ is the only Saviour and that Moslems, Jews, Buddhists and good people must all turn to Christ to have any hope of salvation. I am not ashamed of insisting on that, partly because it is true and Scripture insists on it, partly because there is no other saviour or system which actually deals with sin in all its depth. Christ's death is sufficient, it actually copes with my actual sin, my original sin and the power of sin. I know of no other religion which deals adequately with any one of these, let alone all three.

We do not call on non-Christians to accept Christ as Saviour because we want to undermine their culture, or denigrate their history, or see them as conversion fodder. We do so because there is no other hope for any of us except beneath the cross of Christ; and there we find not just hope but certainty - salvation that is full and free.

(5) ARTICLES 12-16 THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Every one of these Articles dealing with the Christian life focuses on our sinfulness (Article 14 only by implication, but it is clearly meant). To some people that will make the Articles seem negative, unhelpful and lacking in encouragement. 'We don't want to hear about our sins but to be built up, loved and shown the greatness of God' - so the argument goes. In fact, as we shall see, these Articles are marvelously encouraging, they are realistic; they accept us as we are; they deal with the actual human condition; they magnify the grace and goodness of God.

A Sinless Saviour

When we understand the teaching of Article 15 the others fit into place very easily. Articles 12-14 and 16 tackle important questions and controversies to do with how human goodness and sin affect each other, but Article 15 deals with Jesus Christ's goodness, sinlessness and the way he dealt with our sin. When we focus on Christ and learn from him, the truth about ourselves and the world makes sense.

Jesus Christ was fully human

He shared 'our human nature'; he was not God pretending to be man, or dressed up to look like man, or acting like man. His humanity was full and true. This means that he can understand our condition, sympathise with our weaknesses, share our aspirations. He knows how we live and think and feel. And as a complete human being he was able to be our representative before God; to die in our place, to plead our cause, to be head of his body the church.

Jesus Christ was completely sinless

The Article insists that his sinlessness included both his flesh and his spirit. Some have tried to claim that the flesh is always bound by sin and that only by forgetting this fleshly life and concentrating on the things of the Spirit can we be freed from sin. This is escapist mysticism, not Christianity. Jesus Christ, in this flesh which we share, in his human earthly body with its natural functions and weaknesses, was wholly without sin. This says a great deal about our potential as humans, about the positive attitude we should have to our bodies and the physical world, about the importance of seeing body and spirit (soul) as one united whole rather than two competing parts.

Jesus Christ died for our sins

We all know this truth but the Article stresses certain important elements of it. Christ came to this world with the purpose of dying for sin; there was no mistake or ghastly miscalculation, there is no sense in which good was defeated by evil on the cross; God's purpose was not thwarted and he did not have to change plans to cope with a new

situation. Jesus came to be the sacrificial lamb. He came to offer one sacrifice sufficient for sin; we cannot and should not want to see his sacrifice repeated; whether by himself or by human ‘priests’ or by individuals trying to atone for their own misdeeds. It is easy to fall into these traps, as Roman Catholicism does with its claim that the sacrifice is re-enacted on the altar, or as most folk-religion does with its idea that we must suffer to make up for any evil we have committed. Praise God: Christ has dealt fully and finally with sin! He came to pay a sufficient price for all the sins of the whole world; not that every sin is automatically forgiven, or that everyone goes to heaven but that anyone and everyone who comes to Christ and is born again in him will receive free and full forgiveness.

Goodness and Sin

The rest of Article 15 and the other Articles in this study deal with our goodness and sinfulness as opposed to Christ’s. Article 15 insists, in words from 1 John, very familiar to Anglicans, that ‘if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us’. It also reminds us, if we need reminding, that even as baptised and born again Christians, we continue to sin. Articles 12-14 and 16 simply spell out these two truths in greater detail and apply them to various situations.

Goodness and sin before conversion

Article 13 gives offence to many but its teaching is true, necessary and gloriously liberating. What it says is that good deeds done by a non-Christian contribute nothing whatsoever to salvation; they have the same ultimate and eternal value for the soul of the one who performs them as a sinful act. That may sound very hard, even unfair. But the Article is careful to be fair and to argue from Scripture. Because such deeds do not spring from faith in Christ they cannot please God. This is not to say that acts of kindness performed by unbelievers are not kind or to be welcomed but that they are not to be thought of as a substitute for faith.

If we say that deeds done by those living in rebellion against Christ’s demand for faith and total allegiance are other than sinful we are undermining his claims and his lordship. The critical question is not ‘What have you done?’ but ‘Whose side are you on?’ The Roman Catholic teaching was (and still is) that the good deeds of non-Christians make it easier for them to be converted and for God to work in their lives. Does God really depend on your co-operation? If so, there’s no hope for any of us! The freedom and joy his teaching gives is to know that my salvation does not depend on my co-operation with God but solely on his free and sufficient grace.

Goodness after conversion

Articles 12 and 14 apply here, both dealing with the good deeds of the Christian believer. Article 12 insists that although our good deeds can never atone for sin and will always be less than perfect, they are a necessary proof of faith and are pleasing to God. There is always the danger in extreme Protestantism of saying that faith is the only thing that counts; here we are warned that faith which does not prove itself by goodness is a lie and that God is genuinely glad to see good deeds stemming from faith. But the opposite danger, of believing that Christian good deeds are in some way a contributory factor to our

salvation, is firmly dealt with. This one Article repays much study, which will greatly benefit our Christian lives.

Article 14 deals with Christian good deeds, which according to Roman Catholic teaching can create a sort of bank account to our credit with God. These works of ‘supererogation’ (pronounced super-erogation) are thought of as voluntary acts of goodness over and above the bare minimum set out in Scripture. What arrogant nonsense! Scripture insists on perfection, on our whole selves being offered to God. We are not even able to meet that minimum and certainly not to exceed it.

(6) ARTICLE 17: PREDESTINATION & ELECTION

Predestination and election are subjects which always seem to arouse great passions. Often in discussion on this issue much more heat is produced than light. Many of us will have heard of people being attacked as ‘Calvinist’ or ‘Arminian’, almost as if these titles described some particularly evil form of immorality or denied the very existence of God.

On one side of the argument those who stress man’s dignity and his being made in the image of God cling stubbornly to their insistence of free will. “I have the freedom to choose; I chose to follow Christ; it’s a matter of choice and we’re all free to choose our own way; how could God ask us to choose Christ if He doesn’t give us free will?” On the other side we find a stress on the sovereignty of God and the fallenness of man. “No-one can possibly go against God’s will; He chose us in Christ, so we cannot possibly make the choice for ourselves; our wills are so enslaved by sin that we aren’t free to choose at all.”

The ‘Arminians’ accuse the ‘Calvinists’ of not being interested in evangelism: “They say that God chooses who He will save, that we don’t have any choice in the matter, that human responsibility doesn’t really exist, that it’s no use asking for decisions or Christian commitment.” The ‘Calvinists’ accuse the ‘Arminians’ of ignoring the sovereignty of God and of preaching ‘Easybelievism’. “They think it’s just a matter of an easy superficial decision, that we can deal with sin ourselves, that salvation is really a matter of man’s decision not of God’s”.

The argument can go on for a very long time. It often focuses on apparently contradictory texts like ‘I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy’ (Romans 9: 15) and ‘God our Saviour... wants all men to be saved’ (1 Timothy 2: 3-4).

God’s determination to save

The Thirty-nine Articles are a marvellous example of balanced biblical truth on this issue. They take full account of all the teachings of Scripture and present the overall picture very fairly. (In this they actually follow closely the teaching of the much-maligned genius John Calvin - but not of some of his followers, who grossly overstated and oversimplified the truths he taught).

The first paragraph of Article 17, especially the second and third sentences, provide one of the best summaries of the biblical teaching on salvation to be found anywhere. These words describe not only God's will for his people but also his plan and determination to put it into action. And if He did not determine to save me, there is no way I could be saved.

The Bible is clear that God's predestinating and electing love, his choice to save us, is the only possible basis for our salvation. In so many places it makes plain that we cannot save ourselves, deal with our own sin, or even choose to follow Christ without his help at every stage of the way. The whole history of salvation, in Old and New Testaments, is the story of God's choice, his sovereign purposes. He chose and called Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, David, the prophets. On the grand scale He chose the whole people of Israel. In each case there was no goodness or godliness in them which led to his choosing; it was an act of his pure unmerited love.

All these Old Testament choices pointed to Christ. God was choosing these people to be the ancestors and the bearers of the promise, his chosen one, his Messiah or Christ. In the New Testament Jesus himself is the elect one. We are described as being chosen in him. He is the focus of God's choice; all those seen as predestined or chosen are described as being in Christ. Apart from Him we cannot be chosen.

Secure in Christ

It is the fact that we have been chosen in Christ that explains our faith in Him (faith is, after all, His gift) and that gives us grounds for assurance. How can I know I'm going to heaven? Because I know that Christ died for me, that I am one of those chosen by God in Christ to receive the benefits for which He died. If my eternal salvation depended on the strength and lasting quality of my choice, there would be little hope for me; because it rests on the solidity and constancy of God's choice, I can be completely secure.

The second paragraph of Article 17 points out that the doctrine of predestination is 'full of sweet, pleasant and unspeakable comfort to Christians and to those who feel within themselves the working of the Spirit of Christ.' We are meant to be assured, when we have evidence of God's work in our lives, that He has set His love upon us and will never let us go. Predestination isn't meant to be a controversial doctrine but an encouraging one. God's sentence that He has chosen us in Christ shouldn't make our hackles rise but should be heard as a 'comfortable word'.

Receiving God's promises

But there are those who reject the idea of predestination out of hand, often claiming that it is offensive. The Article deals with two groups of objectors. First are the non-Christians, referred to at the end of the second paragraph as 'inquisitive and unspiritual persons' (the word 'inquisitive' means meddling in matters which should not be their concern). The teaching here is simple: that a deep truth like this serves to confuse or alienate unbelievers, because it is not for them. Just as Jesus told His parables so that the faithful would understand but the scoffers would not, so here is a truth which can only be received by those of a humble heart. Many preachers have taken this to mean that predestination or

election should never be mentioned except to an all-Christian congregation. That is not what it says, and both Jesus and Peter clearly preached predestination to very mixed crowds. But we are warned that unbelievers may well not like it.

Second come the Christian objectors to the doctrine. They are dealt with in the short third paragraph of Article 17, with a polite but firm reminder that we are to submit to the teaching of Scripture whether we like it or not: for there alone do we find the truth and the way of salvation.

Some Christians also object to the doctrine on the grounds that it stops people doing evangelism; how can we share the gospel with others if God already knows who is going to be saved? This refusal to evangelize was taught by some of Calvin's more foolish successors (and is still held by some today - often referred to as hypercalvinists). Obviously we cannot understand all of God's ways but the Bible is absolutely clear both that God chooses us in Christ, and that He commands His Church to preach the gospel to all. It may be a mystery but our task is plain.

The grace of God

What predestination and election are all about is God's grace. He chooses us though we are far from attractive to him. He loves us when we do not deserve it. He is faithful to us when we are unfaithful. He ensures our salvation by not only calling us but calling us effectively, with words of love and a gospel of power that we cannot refuse. He promises never to let us go when we come to Christ. He keeps us secure in Christ for all eternity.

As Paul put it in Romans 8: 30-39, 'Those He predestined, He also called; those He called, He also justified; those He justified, He also glorified. What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ... Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? ... [nothing] in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord'. Praise him for His electing grace!

(7) ARTICLES 28-31: HOLY COMMUNION

Sacraments are effectual signs, though not automatic channels, of God's blessing but they must be received aright, with the attitude of the recipient being all-important. Articles 28-31 focus our thinking on the Lord's Supper (the name preferred by the reformers to Holy Communion). Again there is a brief correction of the extreme Protestant misunderstanding; but most of these Articles deal with the dreadful heresies current in the Roman church in the 16th century. Sadly this is still relevant today, with Rome continuing to teach all these doctrines and with many Anglicans once again espousing them. But these Articles are not completely negative: they contain strong and positive teaching too.

A Sharing Supper

Holy Communion is only really a subtitle for the sacrament of bread and wine, which should properly be called The Lord's Supper. This is made clear in the Prayer Book service as well as in the Articles. It is a pity that the modern church overuses the subtitle

and ignores the proper name, because ‘communion’ makes it all sound rather mystical when it ought to be very straightforward. Even worse is the word ‘eucharist’, which really means thanksgiving (only one aspect of the service and not the most important one). The word ‘mass’ is worst of all, with its downright heretical associations with transubstantiation and sacrifice. Archbishop Cranmer tried to get the Church of England to use the title ‘Lord’s Supper’ but sadly it never caught on and we now have a string of less suitable titles.

Article 28 begins by insisting, against the extreme Protestants, that Communion is more than a fellowship meal. It is not just a supper but the Lord’s supper. As we share it aright and with faith we share in Christ himself, partaking of his body and blood. To receive it properly we must prepare carefully, ensuring that we are right with God and trusting in Christ’s death alone for salvation; but once that is done we can be confident of real spiritual blessing, a deeper union with Christ himself, through the sacrament.

The people are to receive both bread and wine (Article 30). In the Middle Ages the Roman church stopped giving wine to lay people altogether and even now offers wine only as an option in more liberated countries like Britain and not at all in many parts of the world. They misapplied the Old Testament restrictions on handling and drinking blood, thinking it too holy, only to be received by priests. But the Article rightly points out that Christ himself gave the bread and the wine to his disciples. As Jews they would have been shocked and horrified when he said ‘this is my blood, drink it, all of you’. The whole point of his death, though, was to be a blood sacrifice to make us right with God and once we are right with him nothing that he has made is unclean, not even blood. So we can eat red meat and black puddings, we can touch blood or dead bodies without being ritually unclean and we can drink wine remembering Christ’s death and receiving the benefits won for us by his blood.

A Spiritual Sacrament

Article 28 makes the one vital statement about communion which denies and destroys the whole Roman and Anglo-catholic teaching: ‘The body of Christ is given, taken and eaten in the supper only in a heavenly and spiritual manner’. The outward sign of the sacrament is that we eat bread and drink wine; the inner reality is that we feed on Christ; but the two are not to be confused. What we eat and drink with our mouths is only bread and wine. We receive Christ in our hearts by faith, not in our mouths by eating.

Two major errors creep in here, both with serious implications. The first is transubstantiation, the doctrine that the bread and wine change into Christ’s body and blood, still the official teaching of the Roman Catholic church and believed by some Anglo-catholics. But, as the Article puts it, this ‘cannot be proved from holy Scripture’ and ‘is repugnant to the plain teaching of Scripture’. A sacrament consists of an outward visible sign and an inner spiritual reality but transubstantiation confuses the two. This doctrine has caused, and continues to cause, enormous problems. In particular it encourages the ridiculous superstition of adoring or worshipping the actual bread as if it were Christ’s very presence. This practice is common in many churches and is

encouraged by 'Corpus Christi' (body of Christ) processions, the idolatry associated with Walsingham, and so on.

Second, less serious than transubstantiation, is the view held by most Anglo-catholics and many church people who have never thought this through. The technical name is consubstantiation, meaning not that the substance changes from bread to flesh but that two substances are joined together. The bread remains bread but Christ's body is joined with it. This is often referred to as 'the real presence' of Christ in the communion. It leads to the superstition that the bread and wine have some mysterious power and can bring blessing to whoever receives them, prepared or not. So, for example, people ask for or offer communion for the sick even when the sick have no real faith. And sick people ask for communion or agree to take it as some sort of insurance policy, thinking that receiving communion will get them into God's good books. When I was a hospital Chaplain the expectation from nurses and patients, encouraged by the national Chaplaincy Advisers, was that giving communion bread and wine to the sick, even without a service or any Bible teaching, was the Chaplain's primary role. This makes receiving communion a good work by which they hope to be saved. The Anglican reformers, especially Cranmer, were perfectly clear about this, teaching Christ's 'real absence' from the bread and wine. Jesus Christ remains bodily in heaven. By faith he can be appropriated as we receive and believe his word. Bread and wine are symbols of this but in themselves they achieve nothing.

Article 29 deals with a further implication of both transubstantiation and consubstantiation, the idea that the bread and wine of communion have some power to convert unbelievers to Christ, or at least to convey some of his blessing. Scripture is very clear about this, and the Article echoes 1 Corinthians 11:27-32. Receiving the sacrament is not enough. Trust in Christ is what is required. Trust in the sacrament is at best misplaced trust and easily becomes idolatry.

A single sacrifice

This may seem wholly negative. It is not, because of the continual stress on Christ and his death. There is a way to peace and salvation, though it is not the sacramental way. Article 31 puts the emphasis where it needs to be (and again has to deal with false teaching).

If we understand Christ's death aright the errors and superstitions surrounding the Lord's supper will quickly disappear. A number of key points are made in Article 31. First, Christ's death was an offering. He acted as a priest with a view to achieving reconciliation between man and God. Second, the offering was made once. There is no need to repeat it, because once was enough. The idea that each communion or mass is a repetition or re-offering of Christ's sacrifice is a slur on the effectiveness of that first offering at Calvary. Third, Christ's self-offering was perfect and complete. Nothing needs to be added to it. We do not need to be good to receive its benefits and we do not need priests to mediate those benefits to us. Fourth, Christ's death deals with sin not by making amends for it (that can never be possible) but by propitiating God. The righteous demands of his anger, his law, his honour, are satisfied. We do not need religion, especially sacramental religion, to please God. God is no more pleased by religion than by any other human

activity. Christ's death alone satisfies his demands. Fifth, the sacrifice of Calvary deals with both original and actual sin. Roman theology makes much of the difference, saying that baptism deals with our original or inherited sinfulness and that the mass is an offering for actual sins we have committed. But sacraments do not deal with sin. Only Christ's death can do so. Sixth, the means by which Christ's death is effective is satisfaction. He died as our substitute, in our place. We cannot make amends for sin. Seventh, Christ is the only Saviour for the whole world. No other person or way can deal with sin or reconcile us to God or God to us. There is no other way of salvation.

This Article finishes with its strong attack on the Roman masses, 'in which it is commonly said that the priest offers Christ for the living and dead so as to gain remission of pain or guilt'. It rightly describes them as 'blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits'. Strong language, but necessary, not least because they dishonour Christ's great work on the cross and they blind people to the only way of salvation.

(8) ARTICLES 19-22: WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

The church is not a building but a people. The Articles are clear on this basic biblical truth but spell it out in more detail. To understand this we need to think about three distinctions: visible and invisible, local and denominational, organization and organism.

The Visible Church of God

Article 19 describes 'the visible church of Christ'. If there is a visible church, is there also an invisible one? The Bible teaches that there is. All who belong to Christ, wherever they are in time or space, are part of the one true church of which he is the head. Within that invisible church there is no unbelief or defiance of Christ's rule. But this true church can only be seen by Christ himself, until we see it in its glory at the end of the age. Until then we dream of and long for the perfect church but we live in a sinful world where the church can only be seen in its visible forms with its many problems.

The same Article describes the visible church as 'a congregation of faithful people'. That implies that each local fellowship is the church, rather than just part of a diocesan or national or wider body. This too is clear Bible teaching. Each gathering of believers, meeting to hear the Word of God and be built up in Christ, is the church (not a small part of the church, not a church but the church). Local churches usually belong to wider groupings such as denominations or national churches and those wider groups can be described as churches (as the Article speaks of the church of Rome). Those groups can have advantages over local fellowships or parishes, in respect of size, influence, money or power - if those are advantages and not distractions. But when we are talking about the visible church we must remember that its focus is at the local level.

It is easy to think of a church as an organization. That is true in that the church needs to be organized. But when we describe it in terms of its organization (buildings, committees, bishops etc) we are in danger of forgetting what it really is: an organism, always breathing, feeding, changing, growing. The Article describes the visible church as a

congregation of faithful people ‘in which the pure word of God is preached and in which the sacraments are rightly administered’. The church, like a living being, constantly depends on nourishment from outside itself. It is not an organization that continues to exist on its own. Like an organism, the moment it stops receiving what it needs from outside, it stops developing and changing, it dies, begins to degenerate and eventually ceases to exist.

Many Churches or One?

We have already seen that there are different definitions of the church. Ultimately it will be seen that there is just one church, what we now call the invisible or the true church. For the present we see many local churches, each entitled to be called the church. And there are wider groups claiming the title of church. Does that mean that we in our own church belong to the same church as all Anglicans throughout the world, or that we do not belong to the same church as Christian friends who may be Baptist or Methodist?

In both cases the answer is ‘no’. Just because a congregation belongs to a body such as the Church of England does not mean it is a real living church. The Article is clear that the church must consist (at least in part) of believers, that ‘the pure word of God’ must be preached and the sacraments properly administered. If any one of these conditions is not fulfilled then the congregation, whatever it calls itself and whatever group or denomination it belongs to, is not the church. Within every denomination there are fellowships which can properly be called ‘the church’ and others which cannot.

And we do belong to the same church as Christian friends of other denominations. Denominations are of relatively little importance. Belonging to the Church of England does not make a congregation a church, any more than does belonging to the Baptist Union or any other human organization. What counts is that our local visible church is a faithful expression of the universal invisible church (as much as it can be with a membership of sinners in a sinful world). If we can truly call ourselves ‘the church’ then we belong to the same church as Bible-believing Baptists who can truly call their fellowship ‘the church’.

There are only two churches: the invisible church (sometimes called ‘catholic’ which means ‘universal’) and the visible church which is always a local organism and may voluntarily organize itself into man-made organizations. These organizations can be very helpful and have often been used by God to bring blessing to the church. But they are not churches and treating them as such can have disastrous results: the real local church loses its sense of identity and mission, and the denomination develops a seriously inflated sense of its importance and tries to organize instead of serve the local church. We see in the second paragraph of Article 19 and in Article 22 that denominations or groups of churches have gone seriously wrong in the past: and we must expect that they will do so in the future. A history of being faithful in submission to the Bible does not guarantee a sound future. Present faithfulness and submission are what matter.

Authority in the Church

If each local fellowship is the church and denominations are man-made groups designed to help the church, it is clear that authority does not lie in the denominations. But it must lie somewhere, because authority in the church is very important.

Article 20, in describing the authority of the church, is talking in part about denominations. In its original intent it insisted that the Church of England was free to organize itself without permission from Rome. That is true and right. But that authority does not lie within the Church of England as a denomination. The Church of England is more a federation of independent local churches than a monolithic Rome-like structure. The authority of the denomination stems from the local churches which comprise it. Insofar as they agree to be bound together for their mutual convenience, the resulting organization can speak and act for them. But they are not bound if the denomination oversteps the limits of its authority. This is true legally in that, for example, parish contributions or quotas to the diocese are purely voluntary payments, with no provision for enforcement.

Churches are not meant to be uniform in character. Each is free to decide how it will operate and worship and to interpret Scripture for itself. But here certain all-important safeguards appear, because churches are not fully independent. They depend wholly on the Lord Jesus Christ and must therefore submit to him and his word. There is great freedom in that but never freedom to go against Scripture, or to twist any part of Scripture in a way that is contradicted by the rest (this is where the sects and cults tend to go wrong). The church has the great privilege of holding the Scriptures, to proclaim and preserve them, but it is not to set itself above their teaching.

General councils are gatherings of the leaders of all churches in the world. These were possible in the early centuries but since the massive growth and the great splits of church history they are unimaginable today. Certainly a body like the World Council of Churches is far from being a general council, not least because so many Bible-believing churches will have nothing to do with its radical theology and politics. But Article 21 still has two important lessons for us.

It insists, firstly, that churches must not come together to talk or plan in any way that looks politically subversive. In the late Middle Ages this was important: it is equally today. The stipulation that rulers (that is political leaders) must agree on any such gathering is not to force the church into submission to the state. This is so it can be seen by all that the church is above board and has no political ambitions. Even though civil leaders may have no Christian beliefs, the church is not to threaten but to support their role. In many ways the church is to be thoroughly revolutionary - but it is never to be political.

Secondly, Article 21 reminds us that even a general council (like its smaller national version, a general synod) is a mixed bag consisting of some who submit to God's word and others who do not. No decision of a council or synod has any authority unless 'it can be shown to be taught by Scripture'. Article 22 underlines this with its sad catalogue of heresies endorsed by the anti-Reformation, Roman Catholic Council of Trent (1545-63).

The same condemnation applies to other more recent Roman inventions (such as those described in chapter 2).

The Church and the Bible

It is clear that authority in the church lies in the Bible. Human leaders may exercise authority but only insofar as it derives from a faithful preaching of Scripture. Indeed, authority must be exercised, because it is impossible to teach God's word properly without doing so authoritatively, and because the right administration of the sacraments (Article 20) demands a judgment as to who may receive them and who may not. The authority to admit to baptism or communion and the authority to excommunicate must be exercised within the local church. But it can only be exercised by those whose lives are seen to be lived in submission to God's word and whose decisions can be demonstrated to be in accordance with God's word.

(9) ARTICLES 33-36: ORGANIZING THE CHURCH

Christ's church needs to be organized. It cannot exist in a state of anarchy, nor is it to be a dictatorship. Freedom and order, love and submission are to exist side by side - as they do in heaven. But on earth this is hard to achieve, because believers are sinful people. We have seen aspects of church order in previous chapters, but Articles 33-36 give us more. These may seem pedantic or irrelevant to the church today: in fact they offer important principles and details.

Discipline

Article 33 raises the issue of excommunication: officially barring people from receiving Holy Communion and thus cutting them off from the heart of church life and fellowship. The Article does not argue for or against excommunication - a practice of the ancient and mediaeval church - but assumes that it will sometimes be necessary. It is the most drastic of the forms of church discipline: not a popular subject today, but biblical and timely. As we consider excommunication we see principles which should govern all church discipline.

1. Proportionate

We see in Articles 33 and 34 that there are degrees of offence in church life, and that the punishment should fit the crime. Blatant sin against God's Word, combined with refusal to repent, merits excommunication (described in the Preface to the Prayer Book Holy Communion Service). Breaking the traditions of the church where such traditions are not in themselves unbiblical should result in public rebuke. The implication is that breaking unbiblical human rules is not to be seen as wrong at all. Clearly God's Word is to be seen as the primary standard: though the church does have authority to legislate or establish customs in secondary matters, and such rules should not be broken by God-fearing people who understand the importance of authority and of respecting the leaders God gives us.

2. Purposeful

Discipline is necessary, but it must always have a clear purpose and not be vindictive. Article 33 shows that excommunication is meant to lead to repentance, and that when it does the penitent is to be received back into fellowship. Article 34 shows the purpose of rebuking less serious offences: that others will be afraid to offend.

3. Public

In both the more serious and the less serious cases the discipline is to be public: the church must be told to avoid the excommunicate who has broken God's Law, and potential offenders are to be warned off by the warning given to one who breaks lesser church rules. This is different from the matter of private grievances between believers: wherever possible these should be settled privately (Matthew 18:15-17). But public or notorious sin calls for a public remedy.

Forms of worship

We have seen already from Article 34 that each church has the right to establish its own traditions, rules and forms of service; similarly each church is free to change or abolish such man-made rules and forms. Article 34 in effect tells us that two important questions must be asked about any proposed new forms: and the same questions must regularly be asked about older rules or traditions even if they have been in existence for centuries.

First, is this new proposal (or this ancient tradition) in any way contrary to God's Word (the Bible)? There are clear examples of new services which can be seen to be unbiblical: some of the allowable options within the 1980 ASB Communion Service include prayers for the bread and wine to change (compared to the Prayer Book and other ASB options which pray biblically that the recipients of the bread and wine may be partakers of Christ); some of the ASB funeral options allow prayers for the dead even though Scripture is very plain that after death comes judgment with no further opportunity to repent (Hebrews 9:27). Old traditions can also sometimes be seen on examination to be unbiblical: the Prayer Book describing an infant after baptism as 'regenerate' (born again), or the refusal (frequent until fairly recently) to allow musical instruments other than organs to accompany congregational singing, despite the encouragement to use them in Psalm 150.

Second, is this proposal (or ancient tradition) likely to build up church members in their faith? It is possible for something in itself neutral to cause such argument and division in a particular congregation that it would be wiser not to introduce it: one example might be 'the kiss of peace' in a Communion Service. Or something neutral can be a great help to people's Christian lives: perhaps a 'Pledge Sunday' or a church houseparty might fit into this category. And it happens that longstanding practices, once of great value, now only cocoon people against the challenge of the Gospel, or even put them off: formal styles of worship, dress or address may be examples here.

Teaching

Article 35 may seem odd at first, directing that homilies be read out in all churches. The point is that at the time of the Reformation many or most clergy were incapable of teaching the Bible. They were used to conducting services in Latin but had received no

training in the content, meaning or languages of Scripture. But the great point of the Reformation was that people must be taught the Bible in sermons which they could understand. Rather than try to sack most of the clergy, or make do with very inadequate preaching throughout the country, Archbishop Cranmer and the other Reformers wisely decided to write Bible teaching sermons which could be read out in the parish churches. The books of homilies (sermons) are rather old-fashioned but still make excellent reading - many preachers I have heard would do much better to modernise and re-use these old classics even today!

The principles behind this are clear: Christians need teaching and it is the duty of clergy to provide it. It must be biblical, appropriate to the situation of the hearers ('necessary for these times') and presented in such a way that it can be understood by the people. How important this is in our own day: how important that Christians pray for and encourage their ministers to be teachers of the Word rather than caught up in other concerns.

Ministry

From the need to teach in Article 35 we move very naturally to the appointment or ordination of ministers in Article 36. The Roman Catholic Church disputed the validity of Anglican ordination (as it still does, even today declaring Anglican orders of ministry 'absolutely null and utterly void'). The Reformers insisted that the Church of England's ordination services were perfectly valid, containing all that is necessary and nothing that is superstitious.

This was a deliberate attack back at Rome, because the implication was that the Roman ordination services did not contain all that was necessary and did contain superstition. The Church of England has never said that Roman Catholic orders of ministry are invalid but certainly taught that there was real room for improvement in Rome's services of ordination.

The real difference between the Roman and the Anglican services is that the Church of England presents the primary task of the clergy as being to understand and preach the Bible; the Roman church sees the sacramental functions as primary (and in those days gave little or no place to Scripture at all). So at ordination the Roman priest is given a communion cup as the symbol of his office, whereas the Anglican receives a Bible. 'All things necessary' is summed up in one of the questions asked of the candidates in the Church of England service: Are you persuaded that the holy Scriptures contain sufficiently all doctrine required of necessity for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ? And are you determined out of the said Scriptures to instruct the people committed to your charge ...?

'Nothing superstitious' is a clear challenge to the Roman practice of giving the communion cup at ordination, which suggests that sacraments, in and of themselves, are God's channels of grace and salvation. The biblical understanding, rediscovered by the continental and English Reformers of the sixteenth century, is that sacraments are visual aids, valuable signs, but secondary to God's Word which must be taught and which is the true life-giving and life-changing power.

(10) ARTICLES 37-39: LIVING IN THE WORLD

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.

(11) ARTICLES 25 & 27: THE SACRAMENTS: BAPTISM

A double battle

The battle for a biblical view of the sacraments had to be fought on two main fronts. In the 16th century, when the Thirty-nine Articles were written, this was seen very clearly. The battle was intense. It cost many lives. But it was absolutely necessary. One of the major errors put salvation itself at risk by denying the great biblical truth of salvation by grace through faith. The other impoverished the Christian life by denying the sacraments as an effective means of grace. The Articles reflect that double battle.

But this is not just a matter of history. One of the tragedies of today is that the battle is still going on. Even though the moderate Reformers in the mid 1500s gave right biblical teaching and by their arguments clearly defeated both main errors, their victory has not been fully understood or accepted, so the heresies continue to be taught and to do great damage even in the so-called Protestant or Reformed churches like our own. The battle continues and is every bit as critical as when men had to die for the truth. The Articles help us to see the biblical teaching and warn us against the two main errors.

In this chapter we see how the biblical teaching on sacraments was laid out against its opponents, and how that works out in the case of baptism. Article 25 begins by tackling the extreme Protestant heresy on sacraments, then describes what sacraments are and a brief final paragraph demolishes the Roman view of them.

Effectual signs

The view of extreme Protestants (sometimes called the Radical Reformers) was that sacraments were important because commanded by Christ, but of no value in themselves. They were simply outward signs: baptism a reminder that Christ's death cleanses from sin and gives new life, Communion a reminder that Christ died for us. No benefit was gained by receiving the sacraments, except that what Christ had done was brought to mind.

This was an understandable reaction to the Roman teaching but it was an over-reaction, in effect throwing the baby out with the bath water. The Article insists that sacraments are effectual signs of God's grace, not empty ones. 'Through them he works invisibly within us'. This language is right and reflects the high view of sacraments in the Bible, where both Baptism and Communion are described as bringing benefits to their recipients. But note carefully: the benefits do not include creating faith or bringing it about: baptism does not make you a Christian. Sacraments may 'bring to life' a faith that is already present and they are effective in 'strengthening and confirming' faith. Jesus commanded two of these outward signs with inner power. The Roman church developed five others (and still insists on seven) but the Article rejects them. Not that marriage, for example, is frowned upon or of no inner value but it does not have an outward sign commanded by Christ. It is the outward sign and the inner working which define a sacrament. A humanly invented outward sign, such as a wedding ring in our culture, does not count. (This is why the Church of England accepts as valid a civil marriage performed by a Registrar: although church weddings are good, there is no biblical rule that churches or ministers should be involved.)

Right reception

The traditional Roman view, only fully developed in the Middle Ages, was that each of the seven sacraments had to be performed by a priest to be valid and that the priest's actions and words actually brought about a miraculous transformation. In marriage man and woman were made one, in Communion bread and wine were made into Christ's body and blood, in baptism a non-Christian was made into a Christian. This led to serious abuses, especially in Communion where the bread and wine came to be venerated or even worshipped.

In these Articles the Roman Catholic practice of venerating the bread and wine merits no serious treatment, but only a few scornful words. ‘The sacraments were not commanded by Christ to be gazed at or carried about but to be used properly’. Yet still we find consecrated bread and wine set aside in church buildings, the place denoted by a special candle or light and all good ‘catholics’ turning in that direction to acknowledge the presence of the Lord. Still we find Roman and Anglo-Catholics celebrating the dreadful rite of benediction, where the displaying of consecrated bread and wine are said to confer a blessing on the congregation. Still we find ‘Corpus Christ’ (body of Christ) processions and celebrations going on. This is not Christianity but superstition.

Article 25 deals simply and biblically with the idea that sacraments convey some automatic blessing, reminding us of Paul’s warning that those who eat the bread and drink the wine unworthily eat and drink judgment on themselves (1 Corinthians 11:27-32). This clearly shows that the sacraments do not bring blessing automatically, but that the attitude of the recipient must be right. Simply being baptised or receiving communion is of no value, and can even bring harm. Proper preparation will include confession of sin, humility of heart, and trust in Christ’s death alone as the way to forgiveness.

A sign of new birth

So we come to the first sacrament, baptism, treated in Article 27. This Article repeats the previous emphasis, against extreme Protestants, that sacraments are effectual. It insists that baptism is ‘not only a sign of profession’ and spells out in some detail the benefits we should expect from this sacrament. It uses the analogy of a legal document, such as the deeds to a house or a marriage certificate. Clearly such things can be forged or come into the wrong hands. In such a case they are worthless and to use them is a serious offence. But in the right hands they are of real value, not only signifying but also actually ratifying or confirming the truths they declare. They are not just a reminder of a truth, but a powerful statement, acceptable in the highest court, serving as proof rather than opinion. My baptism, if I am entitled to it, does not just remind me that forgiveness is possible: it assures me that I am actually forgiven.

The phrase ‘if I am entitled to it’ is vital. The Article states that ‘those who receive baptism in the right manner are grafted into the church’ and goes on to spell out the other benefits. All depends on right reception. We saw this in Article 25 as a principle applying to both sacraments; much more is made of it in Articles 28 and 29 with reference to Holy Communion. Article 26 (which we dealt with under the heading of The Ministry) insists, against the Roman teaching, that it is not the minister’s worthiness that counts but the recipient’s.

This understanding will change long-cherished views. First, the sacraments are God’s gifts to us rather than rituals we do or undergo or offer. It is not so much my duty to receive communion as God’s delight to give it to me. It is not so much the new Christian’s responsibility to seek baptism as God’s pleasure to offer it to him or her.

Second, the efficacy of sacraments does not depend on the goodness of the minister or the soundness of the church or the closeness of the fellowship, but on the recipient’s heart

being right with God. If I am right with God I can receive baptism or communion, and benefit from them, even if minister, church and fellowship all have major problems (naturally this is not an ideal situation, and in other respects, particularly with regard to Christian teaching, I may well suffer, but God's gift of the sacrament is unaffected).

Third, although baptism and Holy Communion are not automatic in their effects, they are much more than just outward signs. They do not make you into a Christian, but they do convey God's blessing. They do not give grace, but because of the necessary preparation and the attitude of humble receptiveness they demand, they do act as a means or channel of grace.

Infant baptism

The assumption behind this teaching is that adult baptism is the norm. When we consider preparation and right reception, when we think of baptism as a sign or seal of faith that is already there, it is obvious that the primary intention is for baptism to be administered to believing adults. Theologically we must hold on to that; our defence of infant baptism must never make it appear as a normal state of affairs. Much harm has arisen from that view, not least when people think that the main way of church growth is by producing children in Christian families. This is introverted and narrow religion, so similar to the perversion we see described (but not commended) in the Old Testament; it is not the missionary faith of Christ. The church is to grow primarily by the conversion of non-Christians to Christ. Baptism should be seen first as God's touch, his visible word of assurance and promise to new adult Christians.

But infant baptism is most certainly allowed, and encouraged in Christian families. This is possible because like the adult version it majors on God's promise rather than our response.

(12) ARTICLES 23, 24, 26, 32: THE CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

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.

(13) ARTICLES FOR TODAY

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.

(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.

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Church Society exists to promote a biblical faith which shapes both the Church of England and the society in which we live for the sake of Christ. Such a faith is carefully expressed in the 39 Articles of Religion and in the Protestant liturgy entrusted to us after the reformation.

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