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Should the 39 Articles of Religion be revised?

A Three-Part Article by Colin Maxwell

Part One

INTRODUCTION

The 39 Articles of the Anglican Religion have become a grave embarrassment to many professing Anglicans. Even in J. C. Ryle's day, the good Bishop had occasion to speak of those who "seem to have a peculiar dislike, an hydrophobic aversion. They seldom refer to them, unless perhaps to sneer at them as the 'forty stripes save one.' They never quote them, never bring them forward if they can possibly help it."¹ Like it or not, these are the official doctrines of the Anglican Church and those to whom they have become an embarrassment have expressed their desire to have them repealed or revised. It may be that many will go along with this cry without even knowing the full issues at hand. It is very easy for some to say that they are outdated. The fact that they have fallen into relative disuse does not mean that they are of no use. The fact that some high ranking clergymen despise them does not mean that they ought to be dropped. It might be good to remind ourselves that those high ranking clergymen got where they are today by constantly affirming these same Articles. It is the purpose of this paper to defend the Articles of Religion.

WHAT ARE THE 39 ARTICLES?

The 39 Articles of Religion were first compiled in 1562, replacing the Articles compiled by Henry VIII. Henry's Articles grew out of the confusion of doctrine that was being preached in the land at that time of reformation and upheaval. The king sent a circular to all the bishops on 12th July 1536, forbidding all preaching until Michaelmas (September 29th) by which time articles of religion would be set down as a doctrinal guideline. The king, believing himself to be something of a theologian, drew up the Articles himself and they were duly agreed by both houses of the Anglican Convocation. The Articles were anything but Biblical and were filled with Romish superstition. Baptismal regeneration, transubstantiation, purgatory, prayers to saints, holy water, the sign of the cross, kissing the cross and images as part of worship were all sanctioned by Henry's Articles. In 1552, Archbishop Cranmer and Bishop Ridley (both later martyred for their faith) compiled 42 Articles which, after an examination by bishops and learned men, were further reviewed by Cranmer and Ridley and ratified by King Edward VI. These Articles became the basis of the present 39 Articles.

EVERY CHURCH NEEDS TO HAVE A SOLID DOCTRINAL STATEMENT OF BELIEF

This was the method of the Apostolic New Testament Church. Whilst we accept that there is no formal doctrinal statement of any great length, set out with chapter headings and scriptural proofs, as is common in the more exhaustive Church Confessions, yet it is obvious that doctrine played a major part in New Testament Christianity. We observe the Lord Jesus Himself getting involved in the doctrinal issues of His day. He challenged the Sadducees who denied the Resurrection. He said that they greatly erred because they knew not the Scriptures.² Even in His soul-winning activities with the woman at the well, He felt it necessary to point out the doctrinal deficiencies of her Samaritan religion.³ We might mul-



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tiply examples by drawing from those references where Christ makes reference to the centrality of His word in true religion.⁴ What is this, but affirming, among other things, the need for true doctrine? Doubtless, true doctrine on its own is insufficient. The Pharisees were generally orthodox in their religion, but their experience of its power left much to be desired.⁵

This insistence on doctrinal purity is carried over into the Apostolic church. The Pentecost believers were marked by steadfast conformity to the apostles' doctrine.⁶ There was an assenting to basic gospel truths which were deemed necessary for admittance into the life of the Church. Those who could not honestly adhere to these doctrines were barred from fellowship and certainly forbidden to preach. When false teaching was introduced, the apostles undertook to root it out and maintain doctrinal purity. Many of the New Testament epistles refute such deviation from doctrinal truth. Among other things, the First Corinthian epistle deals with the heresy that denies that there is a resurrection of the dead.⁷ This heresy had a knock-on effect in that it questioned whether Christ rose from the dead. Subsequently, this too attracted Paul's attention.⁸ The Galatian epistle deals with the error of the Judaizers who believed that faith plus ritual would make a man right with God.⁹ This led to Paul's famous confrontation with Peter¹⁰ who, at least in practice, gave credence to the erring party. The Colossian epistle deals with the Gnostic heresy, which taught that the knowledge of Christ was insufficient.¹¹ And so on. If there was no doctrinal rule or benchmark, then such actions would be impossible. We have some early positive doctrinal statements in the New Testament epistles.¹² Jude calls us to contend earnestly for these statements which he identifies as "the faith once delivered unto the saints"¹³

As the years and indeed centuries passed, the Church found it necessary to formulate its doctrinal basis, based on Scripture alone as its rule of faith and practice. Various heretical sects sought to sail under the flag of authentic Christianity, and it was needful to set forth just what exactly the Bible taught on the various fundamental doctrines of the faith. This gave rise to some early doctrinal statements such as the Apostles' Creed (traced back to the AD 100's) and the Nicene Creed (325 AD) These were generally simple creeds where great doctrines were almost baldly stated without going into any great detail. As time progressed, it became necessary to define further the faith and soon the doctrinal statements became more detailed. The Protestant Reformation, with its emphasis on Biblical purity, saw a number of creeds formulated. These were quite elaborate in their content.

The alternative to a statement of faith is at least confusion, and at worst anarchy. The proverbial "singing from the same hymn sheet" takes on real meaning when discussing this issue. It cannot be that one man's Christ is none other than God manifested in the flesh¹⁴ while another in the same fellowship denies that Christ came in the flesh at all.¹⁵ If one believes that faith alone without the works of the law is sufficient to justify us before God¹⁶ and another insists on circumcision,¹⁷ such will lead to trouble in the Church.¹⁸ Heresies are not a thing of the past. The old heresies have taken on new names and new propagators. Modern day deniers of the Trinity and the physical resurrection of Christ from the dead still abound. If there is no doctrinal statement, then there is no warrant in keeping, for example, Jehovah's Witnesses out of the pulpits of the Church. It is the truth that sets men free.¹⁹ In a world blinded by the Evil One,²⁰ truth must be defined. Where this is so, then all that disagrees with it is deemed to be error.²¹



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THE 39 ARTICLES OF RELIGION PROVIDE A SOLID DOCTRINAL STATEMENT OF BELIEF FOR THE ANGLICAN CHURCH

These Articles take their place among the Great Confessions of the Reformed Protestant faith. They are frequently quoted even by Protestants from other Churches who have their own Confession of Faith. No one can doubt the truth of this fundamental Anglican doctrinal statement, and it is evident that they are something of which Anglicanism can be justly proud.

Footnotes:

1. Knots Untied. Bishop J.C. Ryle, Page 53
2. Mark 12:24
3. John 4:20-22
4. John 15:3; 17:6; 17:17 etc.
5. 2 Timothy 3:5
6. Acts 2:42
7. 1 Corinthians 15:12
8. 1 Corinthians 15:13-20
9. Acts 15:2
10. Galatians 2:11-12
11. Colossians 2:10; 4:12
12. Philippians 2:4-11 etc.
13. Jude 3
14. 1 Timothy 3:16
15. 2 John 7
16. Galatians 2:16
17. Galatians 6:12
18. Galatians 1:7; 5:12
19. John 8:32
20. 2 Corinthians 4:4
21. Isaiah 8:20; Psalm 119:128