



Rooted Disciples: Our Theology from the 39 Articles

Session 1: An Introduction to the Articles

The Big Idea

The Articles are to be interpreted in the light of Scripture and therefore designed to be a guide to Biblical faith. As Christians it is essential that we know what we believe and respond in warm-hearted faith. Far from being irrelevant today, the Articles provide the test of true Anglicanism. They were written to refute error in the English Church and for the 'stablishing of consent touching true religion.'

Scripture Reading:

'But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.' (1 Peter 3:15-16)

A Prayer as we Begin:

A Prayer for the Clergy and People from The Book of Common Prayer (1662)

Almighty and everlasting God, who alone workest great marvels; Send down upon our Bishops, and Curates, and all Congregations committed to their charge, the healthful Spirit of thy grace; and that they may truly please thee, pour upon them the continual dew of thy blessing. Grant this, O Lord, for the honour of our Advocate and Mediator, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Where do we locate the 39 Articles of Religion?

At the end of the Book of Common Prayer (BCP), which is the service book of the Church of England. This contains Morning and Evening Prayer, the Marriage Service, Funeral Service and Daily Psalms to name but a few services.

Today, we are focussing purely on the Articles to avoid being overwhelmed. For those who prefer digital reference, the Articles can be accessed on the Church of England website.

Old-fashioned Language: "Thou doth ask to much of thy servant!"

The Articles have remained in their old language, with thee, thou etc. However, I want to resist us considering this until session 2 to avoid what I believe would be a distraction at this early stage. I warmly encourage you not to pass judgement before having the Articles explained in future sessions.



The Articles Present a Bible-Centred Church.

We live in a time of deep Anglican Confusion. Assemble clergy or laity, listen to debates of the General Synod and you might think that Anglicans have no idea what they believe. If we return to the roots of Anglicanism, we see great clarity upon what Anglicans believe, and these still represent the official teaching of the Church.

Canons A2 and A5:

‘The Thirty-nine Articles are agreeable to the Word of God and may be assented unto with a good conscience by all members of the Church of England.’

‘The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the Holy Scripture, and in such teachings of the Ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures. In particular such doctrine is to be found in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal.’

Clergy and Readers make a declaration of assent to Scripture, the creeds and the ‘historic formularies of the Church of England’ which bear witness to these.

‘I, A,B, do so affirm, and accordingly declare my belief in the faith which is revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds and to which the historic formularies of the Church of England bear witness...’

Some clergy say they will assent to these being the Articles, but not to the Articles themselves. That is a distortion of what they are being asked to do!

How Were the Articles Developed?

1517- The Reformation begins with Martin Luther circulating 95 theses
Henry VIII fancies himself as a bit of a theologian and is made ‘defender of the faith’ by the Pope

1535- English theologians visit Luther to learn from his Augsburg Confession

1536- Adoption of 10 Articles (protestant)

Henry has a change of heart (tries to restore ‘old religion’)

1547 Henry dies and Archbishop Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556) introduces far reaching reforms as part of Regency Council where he doesn’t have a completely free hand but brings protestant influence.

1549 First stab at prayer book with some Articles

1552 Second Prayer Book

1553 Royal Assent given and king Edward VI dies within days

1545-63 Council of Trent (Roman Catholic) meets to deal with Protestantism and in turn forms the backdrop to the Articles refutation of Catholic doctrine.

6th July 1553- Edward VI dies being succeeded by Mary I, aptly known as ‘bloody Mary’.

Cranmer is put to death. ‘Mary did her best to put the clock back to 1534 and if she had lived or produced a credible heir, she might have succeeded’ (Gerald Bray).

Mary persecuted so many Protestants that sympathy was won for the Protestant movement and so Elizabeth I could reinstate the position that Cranmer had achieved at the death of Edward VI.



1558 Elizabeth succeeds to the throne and makes the Prayer Book more acceptable to traditionalists in her 'settlement'. Many changes were designed to placate such people and made little or no change to doctrine.

1595 Archbishop Whitgift attempted to remove the article on predestination, but Elizabeth overruled (possibly for political rather than theological reasons).

1649 and again in 1690 Scots adopt the Westminster Confession as their doctrinal rule and reject episcopacy.

1662 Book of Common Prayer containing 39 Articles which are the standard for today with the 'curious declaration of Charles I prefixed to them as a reminder (and a warning) to anyone who might want to reopen the question of their adequacy' (Gerald Bray).

Born From Controversy

The Articles were clearly designed to counter perceived error in the Roman Church. They were directly influenced by the Reformation that was happening on the continent. But ultimately, they were a return to the Bible. Those who object to the historical context should remember that the Creeds of the early Church (Nicene, Apostles and Athanasian) were also born out of conflict. It is natural that churches should want to combat error and we're told to contend for the faith (Jude 1:3).

The Purpose of the Articles

'We are desirous of setting forth in our churches the true doctrine of God, and have no wish to adapt it to all tastes and to trifle with ambiguities, but, laying aside all carnal and prudential motives, to transmit to posterity a true and explicit form of doctrine agreeable to the rule of sacred writings.' (Cranmer in a personal letter of 1548 in Griffiths).

The Articles were: 'For the avoiding of the diversities of opinions and for the establishing of consent touching true religion.' (The Act of Uniformity of 1662)

So why have we not been better acquainted with the Articles and how can people say that Anglicanism is entitled to be a theological hotchpotch?

Why bother with Creeds, Confessions and Articles when we have the Bible?

Every religion has a Creed in one form or another and we might add every organisation. Because the Bible contains narrative, poetry and history it is necessary to extract theology to make it accessible and convenient for worshippers.

As William Tyndale (died 1536) longed to put the Bible into the hand of the ploughboy, so Cranmer longed to make complex theological arguments brief enough and accessible enough to be memorised and expounded for everyday people. He insisted that the Articles were in step with Reformation thought but left some secondary matters open.

The Westminster Confession of Faith leaves few stones unturned, but it is huge! Calvin's Institutes of Christian Religion are glorious, but they are also beyond the grasp of most ordinary people.



But what about those who object to doctrinal statements, however brief they might be, on the grounds that they smack of religion (by which such people usually mean empty religion).

Griffiths answers nicely:

‘The intellectual grasp of Christianity is essential for a strong Christian life, for giving balance and force to experience, for protection against error, for equipment for service.’

We all should understand the difference between relationship and religion. However, this can be an oversimplification, because our relationship with God is fuelled by growing in wisdom and knowledge (Luke 2:52).

We must never think, however, that having the most precise and Biblical doctrinal statements excuses us from putting those truths into practice. God desires truth in the inward parts (Psalm 51:6). Flesh can only give birth to flesh, and the Spirit must give birth to spirit (John 3:6). Or, to use a common term from contemporary debates: ‘To be orthodox is not to be saved. Faith is the surrender of the soul to God’ (Griffiths.)

What Function Might the Articles Have Today?

The following are from Jim Packer:

- Use one is declaratory
- Use two is didactic
- Use three is defensive and denunciatory
- Use four is disciplinary
- Use five is doxological

Bishop J.C. Ryle said that the Church was not ‘to be a kind of theological Noah’s Ark, within which every kind of opinion and creed shall dwell safe.’

The Articles, says Jim Packer, ‘were meant to act as the Church of England’s theological identity card, showing what she stood for in a split and warring Christendom.’

Do the Articles still have Weight Today?

The Prayer Book and Articles are still the official form of service and theology of the Church of England. No further forms of service were introduced until the Alternative Service Book (1980) and Common Worship (2000). These were not intended to contradict or replace the BCP.

‘The Book of Common Prayer remains the permanently authorized provision for public worship in the Church of England...’ Preface to Common Worship.



I have some reservations about Common Worship. Positively speaking, Common Worship has the worshipper reading lots of Bible and there is much that is Biblical within its liturgies. One treasure of Common Worship is that it provided the BCP Communion Service in modern language as an option!

Questions

How do you feel about the idea of our church having Articles to refer to?

Do you think it is helpful for the Church to write down what she believes?

Did anything surprise, interest or intrigue you from this session?

Hymn: The Church's One Foundation MP 640

Primary Source

The Book of Common Prayer (1662)

Select Secondary Sources:

Bray, G. (2009) *The Faith We Confess: An Exposition of the Thirty- Nine Articles* (The Latimer Trust)

Griffith Thomas, W.H. (1930) *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles* (CBR Press)

Packer, J.I. and Beckwith, R.T. (2006) *The Thirty-Nine Articles: Their Place and Use Today* (The Latimer Trust)



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