

THE THIRTY NINE ARTICLES

A Re-statement by Philip E. Hughes.

Copyright © 1988 by the Church of England in South Africa.

1. The Holy Trinity

There is only one living and true God. His existence is everlasting, without beginning or end. As a spiritual being, not limited by a body and bodily members, and free from bodily desires and impulses, his power, wisdom, and goodness are infinite. He is the Creator and Preserver of all things whether seen or unseen. In the unity of this one true God there are three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who are one in being, power and eternity.

2. Of the Word or Son of God

The Son, who is the Word of the Father (Jn 1.1), is the Son of the Father from everlasting to everlasting. He is truly and eternally God, one with the Father in being. He took our human nature to himself in the womb of the virgin Mary, so that two full and perfect natures, his divine and our human nature, were united in the one person of the incarnate Son, never to be divided. There is therefore one Christ who is truly God and truly man, and who truly suffered, was crucified, died and was buried. By Christ's sacrifice of himself, not only for original guilt but also for all actual sins of men, God was reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5.19).

3. Christ's descent to the grave

As Christ died for us and was buried, so also it is to be believed that the giving up of his life was a reality.

4. Of the Resurrection of Christ

Christ truly rose again from the dead. His was a bodily resurrection, with flesh, bones and all things that belong to the perfection of our human nature. His ascension was a bodily ascension into heaven, where he is now enthroned until the last day, when he will return to judge all men.

5. The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son is one in being, majesty, and glory with the Father and the Son, and thus is truly and eternally God.

6. The sufficiency of Holy Scripture for our salvation

Holy Scripture sets forth everything that is necessary for our salvation. Consequently, nobody should be required to believe as an article of the Christian faith, or to regard as necessary for salvation, anything that is not found in Scripture. By the term Holy Scripture we mean the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments, namely:

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2 and 3 John, Jude, Revelation.

The books known as the Apocrypha are read by the Church, as Jerome said, because of the examples they provide of the heroic lives and faithful conduct; but the Church does not use these books to establish any doctrine.

7. The Old Testament

The Old Testament is not contrary to the New Testament. In the Old as well as in the New Testament, everlasting life is offered to mankind through Christ; for Christ, who is both God and man, is the only Mediator between God and man. Therefore we must not pay attention to any who say that in the Old Testament the patriarchs and others were limited in their expectation to transitory promises. Although the ceremonies and rites of the Law which God gave through Moses, are not binding on Christians, and the civil precepts of the Law are not essential for the organisation of any state or commonwealth, yet no Christian is free from obedience to the commandments known as moral.

8. The three creeds

The three creeds, namely the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and what is commonly called the Apostles' Creed, should be received and believed without reservation, because they may be proved from Holy Scripture.

9. Original sin

Original sin does not consist in imitating the sin of Adam, (as the Pelagians wrongly teach), but is the fault and corruption of the nature with which all descendants of Adam are born. It is due to original sin that we have departed very far from the original righteousness in which we were created, and are naturally inclined to evil, with the result that there is a constant war between flesh and the spirit. Accordingly in every person born into this world, original sin is deserving of God's wrath and condemnation. This infection of our nature remains even in those who in Christ are reborn. Because of it the desire of the flesh is not submissive to the Law of God. True though it is that there is no condemnation awaiting those who believe and are baptised, yet the Apostle asserts that all ungodly desires are in themselves sinful.

10. Free Will

Since the fall of Adam man's state is such that he is unable, by his own natural strength and good works, to turn and dispose himself to believe and call upon God. Consequently, we have no power of our own to do good works that are pleasing and acceptable to God, unless the grace of God is first given through Christ, so that we may have a good will, and that same grace continues at work within us to maintain that good will.

11. Justification

It is not because of any good works or deservings on our part, but only by faith which rests on the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, that we are accounted righteous before God. Therefore, the doctrine of our justification by faith alone is most edifying and full of strength and comfort. (This doctrine is more fully explained in the Homily on Justification.)

12. Good works

Although good works, which are the fruits of faith and follow after our justification, cannot put away our sins, and are subject to the severity of God's judgment, yet, inasmuch as they are done in Christ and for His sake, they are pleasing and acceptable to God; for they spring necessarily from a true and vital faith, and are indeed the evidence of a vital faith, just as a tree is recognised by its fruit.

13. Works before Justification

Works that are done before receiving the grace of Christ and the indwelling of his Spirit are not pleasing to God, because they do not spring from faith in Jesus Christ; nor is it true (as some say) that they render us fit to receive grace or are deserving of grace. On the contrary, the fact that such works are not done as God has willed and commanded them to be done can only mean that they have the nature of sin.

14. Works of Supererogation

Works which are supposedly done voluntarily beyond and in excess of what is required by God's commandments (known as works of supererogation) cannot be taught without self-centred arrogance and irreverence; for it is claimed that persons who perform such works render to God not only as much as it is their duty to render, but actually do for God more than is of bounden duty required; whereas Christ plainly stated, "When you have done all that is commanded, say, We are unprofitable servants." (Luke 17.10).

15. Christ alone without sin

As our true fellow man Christ was like us in all respects, with the exception only of sin, from which he was completely free, both in his flesh and in his spirit. He came into the world to be the Lamb without spot or blemish, and by his once-for-all sacrifice of himself to take away the sins of the world as the one in whom, as St John says, there was no sin (Jn 1.29; 1 Jn 3.5). But all the rest of us, though we have been baptized and born again in Christ, continue to offend in many things; and "if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1.8).

16. Sin after Baptism

Not every serious sin committed after our baptism is an unpardonable sin against the Holy Spirit. Therefore persons who fall into sin after baptism should be encouraged to repent. After we have received the Holy Spirit it is possible for us to turn away from the grace we have experienced and to fall into sin, and it is possible for us who have fallen to rise again and amend our lives by the grace of God. Therefore persons who say that they cannot sin any more as long as they continue in this life (claiming to have attained sinless perfection), or who deny any opportunity of forgiveness to those who truly repent, are to be condemned.

17. Predestination and Election

Predestination to life belongs to God's everlasting purpose. By this is meant that before foundation of the world, it is his unchangeable decree, in accordance with his secret counsel to deliver from curse and damnation those whom he has chosen in Christ, and to bring them by him to everlasting salvation, as vessels of his mercy (Rom 9.21ff). Therefore, those on whom such an excellent blessing of God is bestowed are called according to God's purpose by the Holy Spirit working in them in God's good time; through grace they obey this calling and are freely justified by God; they

become the sons of God by adoption (Rom 3.24; 8.15f); they are conformed to the image of his only Son Jesus Christ; they lead holy lives that are given to good works to the glory of God; and at last, by God's mercy, they attain to everlasting bliss (Rom 8.29f; Eph 2.8-10).

The reverent consideration of our predestination and election in Christ is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable strength to godly persons, who feel the working in themselves of the Spirit of Christ, mortifying the works of the flesh and their earthly passions and drawing their thoughts upward to high and heavenly realities. This teaching is welcome to us both because it strongly establishes and confirms our assurance of eternal salvation to be enjoyed through Christ, and also because it kindles in us a fervent love to God. For unregenerated persons, however, who are moved by idle curiosity and who do not have the Spirit of Christ, to be constantly confronted with the doctrine God's predestination is dangerous and disastrous, since the devil uses it to drive them either to despair or to abandon themselves to immoral and ungodly living, which is no less perilous than despair.

Furthermore, we must accept God's promises in the way in which they are ordinarily presented to us in Holy Scripture, and in all that we do the will of God is to be followed precisely as it is revealed to us in the Word of God.

18. Salvation in Christ alone

They are to be condemned as false teachers who assert that persons will be saved no matter what beliefs they hold or what sect they belong to, provided they sincerely lead their lives according to those beliefs and to the light of nature; for Holy Scripture insists that it only by the name of Jesus Christ that we may be saved (Acts 4.12).

19. The Church

The visible Church of Christ is a gathering of believing people in the which the pure Word of God is preached and the sacraments are ministered with due order and discipline as ordained by Christ. Together with other churches, the Church of Rome has erred, not only matters of conduct and ceremonial but also in matters of doctrine.

20. The Authority of the Church

The Church has power to prescribe rites and ceremonies and has authority in theological controversies; but it is not lawful for the Church to prescribe anything that is contrary to God's written Word, or to expound one passage of Scripture in such a way that it disagrees with another. Therefore, although the Church is a witness and a guardian of Holy Scripture, yet it is not open to it to prescribe anything contrary to Scripture, or to enforce anything not found in Scripture to be believed as necessary to salvation.

21. The authority of General Councils

Even general councils may err when they meet, and sometimes have erred, even in issues of theological importance - for such councils are composed of men, not all of whom may be governed by the Spirit and the Word of God. Therefore, nothing declared by such councils as necessary for salvation has binding power or authority unless it is plainly taught in Holy Scripture.

22. Purgatory

The Romish teaching about purgatory, pardons, the worship and adoration of images and relics, and also the practice of praying to saints, is a futile deception, which, far from being grounded in Scripture, is repugnant to the Word of God.

23. Ministering in the congregation

No man is permitted to take upon himself the office of public preaching or ministration of the sacraments before he has been called and appointed to fulfil this office. Those persons should be accepted as lawfully called and appointed who have been selected and called to this work by men entrusted with public authority in the Church to call and send ministers into the Lord's vineyard.

24. The language of public worship

It is plainly incompatible with the Word of God, and with the custom of the primitive Church to conduct public worship or to minister the sacraments in the Church in a language the people do not understand.

25. The Sacraments

The sacraments prescribed by Christ are badges and tokens of our profession as Christians, and, more particularly, they are trustworthy witnesses and effectual signs of God's grace and good will to us. By them God works invisibly in us, both arousing and also strengthening and confirming our faith in him.

Christ our Lord has ordained two gospel sacraments, namely baptism and the Lord's supper.

The five that are commonly called sacraments, namely, confirmation, penance, ordination, matrimony, and extreme unction are not to be received as sacraments of the gospel, since they have in part developed from a false understanding of apostolic practice and in part represent states of life allowed in the Scriptures. Moreover, because they have no visible sign or ceremony commanded by God, they do not belong in the same category as the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper.

The sacraments were not appointed by Christ to be a public spectacle or to be paraded for adoration, but to be used with due discipline. They have a beneficial effect or working only in those who receive them worthily; whereas those who receive them unworthily bring condemnation on themselves, as St Paul teaches (1 Cor 11.27ff).

26. The Unworthiness of ministers

Although in the visible Church there is always a mingling of evil good, and at times evil persons hold the chief positions in the ministry of the Word and sacraments, yet, because they do so not in their own but in Christ's name and perform their ministry by his commission and authority, we may avail ourselves of their ministry both in hearing the Word of God and in receiving the sacraments. The effect of Christ's ordinance is not taken away by their wickedness, nor is the grace of God's gifts diminished in the case of those who receive the sacraments rightly and by faith; for, although ministered by evil men, these are effectual on account of Christ's institution and promise.

Nevertheless, it belongs to the discipline of the Church that evil ministers should be investigated and that they should be accused by those who have knowledge of their offences, and, further, that, on being found guilty, they should by just judgment be deposed.

27. Baptism

Baptism is a sign of the faith we profess and a mark that differentiates Christian persons from those who are unbaptized; and it is also a sign of regeneration or new birth by which, as by an instrument, those who receive baptism rightly are grafted into the Church, the promises of forgiveness of sin and of our adoption to be the sons of God are visibly signified and sealed, and faith is confirmed and grace increased by virtue of prayer to God. The baptism of young children is under all circumstances to be retained in the Church as a practice fully agreeable with the institution of Christ.

28. The Lord's supper

The supper of the Lord is not only a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves for each other, but is especially a sacrament of our redemption by Christ's death. Accordingly, for those who rightly, worthily, and with faith receive it the bread that is broken is a partaking of the body of Christ and the cup of blessing is a partaking of the blood of Christ (1 Cor 10.16).

Transubstantiation (the teaching that the substance the bread and wine is changed into the actual flesh and blood of Christ) in the supper of the Lord cannot be proved by Holy Scripture, but is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture, overthrows the nature of a sacrament, and has given rise to many superstitions.

In the Lord's supper the body of Christ is given, taken and eaten only in a heavenly or spiritual manner, and faith is the means by which the body of Christ is received and eaten in the supper.

The Sacrament of the Lord's supper was not commanded by Christ to be reserved, carried about, lifted up, or worshipped.

29. The participation of unbelievers

Though wicked persons, and all in whom a vital faith is absent, physically and visibly press the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ with their teeth (as Saint Augustine says), yet in no sense are they partakers of Christ; on the contrary, they eat and drink the sign or sacrament of so great a reality to their own condemnation.

30. Communion in both kinds

The cup of the Lord is not to be denied to the laity, for both parts of the Lord's sacrament, the wine as well as the bread, ought by Christ's ordinance and commandment to be ministered alike to all Christian persons.

31. The one offering of Christ finished in the cross

Christ's offering of himself on the cross, once for all, is the perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual, and there is no other satisfaction for sin, but that alone. Therefore the sacrifices of masses, in which it is commonly said that the Priest offers Christ for the living and the dead, to obtain the remission of their punishment or guilt, are blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits.

32. The marriage of ministers

Bishops, presbyters, and deacons are not commanded by God's Law to take vows of celibacy or to abstain from marriage; therefore it is lawful for them, as for all other Christian persons, to marry at their own discretion, where they judge that it serves better to godliness for them to do so.

33. Excommunicated persons

Any person who by open denunciation of the Church is rightly cut off from the unity of the Church and excommunicated ought to be treated by the whole company of the faithful as a heathen and a traitor, until such time as he is reconciled by penitence and received back into the Church by a judge with authority to do so (cf Mt 18.17).

34. The traditions of the church

It is not necessary that traditions and ceremonies should be uniform and identical in every place; for these have at all times been diversified, and they may be changed to accord with the diversities of countries, times, and human customs, provided that nothing be ordained contrary to God's Word. Anyone who by his private judgment willingly and deliberately breaks the traditions and ceremonies of the Church which are not repugnant to the Word of God, and are appointed and approved by common authority, ought to be openly rebuked (so that others may fear to follow his example) as one who offends against the common order of the Church, undermines authority, and wounds the consciences of weak fellow Christians.

Every particular or national church has authority to prescribe, change and abolish ceremonies or rites of the Church which have been ordered only by human authority, providing that all things are done for edification.

35. The Homilies

The two books of Homilies, which were set forth in the times of Edward VI and Elizabeth I respectively, contain godly and wholesome teaching.

36. The Consecration

of Bishops and Ministers The form of consecration of Archbishops and bishops and the ordering of presbyters and deacons, set forth in the time of Edward VI, contain all things necessary for such consecration and ordering and nothing that of itself is superstitious and ungodly. Therefore anyone who is consecrated or ordained according to these rites we declare to be rightly, orderly, and lawfully consecrated and ordained.

37. Civil Magistrates

We do not give to our princes or rulers the right to minister either God's Word or the sacraments. The only prerogative which we recognise as having been given by God himself in Holy Scripture to all godly rulers is that they should rule all states and classes committed to their charge by God, whether ecclesiastical or secular, and restrain with the civil sword stubborn persons and evildoers.

The Bishop of Rome has no jurisdiction in this realm.

Christians may be punished by the laws of the realm with death for heinous and grievous offences.

It is lawful for Christian men to carry weapons and serve in wars at the command of the civil ruler.

38. Private property

The wealth and possessions of Christians are not common to all nor is their right and title to own private property to be questioned. Nevertheless, every person ought to give liberally and according to his ability from the things he possesses to the poor.

39. Oath-taking

While we acknowledge that vain and rash swearing is forbidden to Christians by our Lord Jesus Christ, and St James (Mt 5.34-37; Jam 5.12), we judge that our Christian religion does not prohibit us from swearing an oath when it is required by the magistrate in the cause of good faith and charity, providing it is done according to the prophet's teaching in justice, judgment and truth.

Transcribed by Hilmar von Fintel - May 1998