

A Brief Introduction to “The Faith of Anglicans”

God is an Acting and Speaking God.

Let me begin by stating several important things in one brief paragraph. First, the foundational premise underlying the 39 Articles is the same as that of our Christian faith: that God is an acting and speaking God.

The true and living God is unique in many ways. He is the Only true and living God. All other so called gods are idols or erroneous figments of our fallen human spirit, or demons clothed in deceptive form.

God is the creator of all that is, other than Himself. He both transcends and permeates His creation. One of His unique attributes is that He is a God who acts and speaks to us. His Word and words matter.

As the prophets tell us, “the idols of the world have ears but hear not, eyes but see not, mouths but speak not”. Christianity, on the other hand, is a faith that embraces God’s revelation of Himself through His words and deeds, often His word makes clear the meaning of His divine action and His intention that we should come to know and love Him as He knows and loves us.

Ultimately, from this divine speaking comes the inspired Holy Bible, the Word of God written, and such commentaries that the Church forms to summarize the essential teaching found in Scripture and to refute such errors that have found their way into the on- going life of the Church.

The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion are such a commentary. The Articles are not on the same level as the Bible which alone is the inspired Word of God; we should note that while on the one hand, they derive their authority primarily from the accuracy and the faithfulness of their summarization and application of Scripture, on the other hand the Articles are official statements of the teaching of the Church that adopts them, as Anglicans have done. When they were first formulated they were binding on all who taught in the Church, both clergy and lay.

The Historical setting of the 39 Articles

Anglicans have always intended to be in accord with the main line of the Catholic Church from the early Church on. The Articles were and are intended to be a correction not a replacement. This commitment is reflected in our appeal to the three Creeds, the first four Ecumenical Councils and the retention of Bishops in historic succession. The first five Articles state the common faith we have with the Church Catholic, both in the East and West.

By the 16th Century, however, there were differences of substance in the teaching of the Western branch of the Church and they needed to be addressed. This led to the great 16th Century Reformation. The Pope and the Roman Catholic Church addressed the issues in the Council of Trent (1545-1563) and the Anglicans responded with a commission to do the same,(39 Articles, 1552-1571) as did the Lutherans (Augsburg Confession) and the Reformed Churches coming from the influence of John Calvin(various, Heidelberg Catechism). When it was all over The Western branch of the Church was divided and remains so today. The 11th Century break with the Eastern Orthodox Churches over Papal authority and the procession of the Holy Spirit also remains.

The 39 Articles were being written while the teachings of the Roman Catholic Council of Trent were being written. In a number of the 39 Articles we find they are explicitly critical of the unwillingness of Trent to adopt what Scripture teaches.

In 1571, the 39 Articles were finally adopted by Parliament, the Convocations of Lambeth and York and the Queen as authoritative for the preaching and teaching in the Church of England. They have been printed in the back of every edition of the Anglican Books of Common Prayer ever since.

The uniqueness of the Anglican Way

Among the Churches of the Reformation Anglicans are unique in several ways.

1. Anglicans, unlike the Reformed Churches that welcome only that which is expressly stated in Scripture, love godly tradition that is not mandated by Scripture., If a tradition, formed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is agreeable to Scripture and lends stability and effectiveness to the life and work of the Church we delight in it. Our liturgies reflect this.

2. While we give great importance to the preaching and teaching of the Word of God, we also give great weight to the celebration of the Sacraments and the five ancient practices that serve as significant events in the life of the Church. We are a Word and Sacrament Church.

3. We take a back seat to no one in asserting that everything depends on the grace of God given to undeserving sinners through the mediation and work of Jesus Christ. Our statement on justification makes that point clearly. But we also believe that we are called to a holy life, filled with good works as “God has created for us to walk in.” Grace not only justifies the sinner but begins his or her sanctification. This gives us the warmhearted welcome of the fallen sinner and the

call of an intentional life of loving service to all, specially to those of the household of God. We are a Way of faith and works.

This combination of characteristics is unique among the denominations and expresses, we believe, what is held before us in Holy Scripture. We are inheritors of richness we do not deserve.

The authority of the 39 Articles in Anglican Provinces or Churches

While written to be binding on all the preaching and teaching in the Church of England, it is clear that not all Anglican Churches hold the Articles to have such an authoritative position. The Church of Nigeria, the largest Province of Anglicans in the world, does give them such authority, but the Episcopal Church relegates them to an historical section. The other Provinces either take similar stances or fall somewhere in between.

Some characteristics of the 39 Articles to appreciate

1. They are generous but clear. The Articles seek only to state the common Faith of the Church. Anglicans intend no special theology, so the Articles are written to be as inclusive as possible. In this sense they are ecumenical. On the other hand, they are clear. Where error endangers the substance of the Gospel and the Faith as set forth in Scripture they are clear. No fooling about. Wrong is wrong and must be addressed no matter the cost.

2. They are concise. It is amazing how much they state in a few brief sentences, while being comprehensive and accurate.

3. They are elegant. Much was written by Thomas Cranmer who was a genius in language as both our Prayer Books and the Articles make evident. They are a delight to read and meditate upon.

4. Finally they are Gospel centered. To read the Articles in a thoughtful and meditative way is to be encouraged in your soul.

Conclusion

You are about to work your way through a wonderful gift from those who have gone before us, from Moses through Cranmer and the other Anglican reformers. May the Lord bless you as you do so.

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