



## Rooted Disciples: Our Theology from the 39 Articles

### Session 2: The Substance of Faith Articles I-V

#### **Introduction**

Why start with Article I and not Articles VI to VIII?

This is a question that must be asked, given that our knowledge of God comes from the Word. Should we not begin with Articles VI to VIII?

To understand the reason for this, we must see that the Articles were not designed to be a systematic statement of Christian doctrine, but to respond to the needs of the day. As we saw in session I, the Articles did not pretend to be a complete body of divinity but 'for the avoiding of diversity of opinions, and for the establishing of consent touching true religion' (Book of Common Prayer).

#### **The Catholic Articles**

Articles I-IV were placed at the start to show 'the vital agreement of Reformation doctrine with that of the medieval and primitive Church on the realities of Christian Theism' Griffiths (lix).

The Reformers were not claiming to be introducing something new, but to be returning the Church to Biblical faith. They therefore began with doctrines that could be agreed upon and could be regarded with a few exceptions as 'pan-Christian' (Bray).

'Where the Catholics stressed the importance of institutional or historical continuity, the reformers emphasised equally the importance of doctrinal continuity' (A.E. McGrath)

As Anglicans we don't prioritise Apostolic Succession- that is the historical chain of ordination going back to the apostles- as a guarantee of God's grace. We emphasise the responsibility of the church in preserving the truth, as she submits to Scripture. This means that the Articles are not anti-tradition, as long as 'nothing be ordained against God's Word' (Article XXXIV).

#### **ARTICLE I - *Of Faith in the Holy Trinity***

##### **God is there**

'There is....God.' The general theistic position backed up by 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (Genesis 1:1). Like the Scriptures, they don't so much attempt to prove God's existence as assume and affirm it (Griffiths.)

It was being surrounded by heresy that compelled the church to a close definition of God.



Following Griffiths, five aspects of the nature of God are stated in the Article:

1. His unity- 'There is one...God' (Deuteronomy 6:4)
2. His life- 'There is one living...God.' He is the source of life and to worthless things and idols (Acts 14:15)
3. His truth- 'There is one living and true God...' Against falsity and unreality (John 17:3)
4. His eternity- 'There is one living and true God, everlasting.' The First Cause. A being with no limitation of time or space (1 Timothy 1:17).
5. His spirituality- 'Without body, parts or passions' (some radical protestants suggested the Father had a body.)

Without parts means that he is indivisible and there is 'no internal conflict' (Atherstone).

### **A God 'without passions'!?**

This does not mean that God is incapable of feeling pleasure or pain. In Isaiah 63:9-10 we see God's strong emotions.

We understand that suffering, for example in the divine sacrifice, was part of the self-limitation of God.

However, God is unlike us in that he is not overcome by emotion or ruled by it. It should be a comfort to us that he does not change like we do (James 1:17) and he is not ruled by anything apart from his own decrees.

'He is incapable of being subjected with anything by an agent stronger than himself' (Griffiths). If God was subject to something other than himself, that thing would be God instead. But God says, 'I am the LORD and there is no other; apart from me there is no God' (Isaiah 45:5)

### **God is not like an old watchmaker**

'Maker and Preserver'

By 'maker' the Reformers wanted to stress that God was transcendent and by 'preserver' that he was sustaining all things.

Transcendence must avoid slipping into the heresy of deism which was akin to seeing God like an old-fashioned watchmaker who wound up the watch to set it going but thereafter was uninvolved. So 'preserver' was added to show that He remains intimately involved.

### **God is not in the tree, waterfall, flowers....**

'Preserver' or to use the theological term, God's immanence, must avoid the heresy of pantheism, which is the view where God is absorbed into creation and the creation is divine. Such is the 'mother nature' view of god. Maybe we are dangerously close to worshipping the earth today in extreme forms of climate activism? By saying maker, we are defending against this heresy.



Rather cleverly, by stressing *both* ‘maker’ and ‘preserver’, the Articles avoid these tendencies.

## **The Trinity**

‘And in unity of this godhead there be three persons’

By Trinity we mean the specific and unique Christian idea of the Godhead.

Other religions may have concepts of grace, but our richer concept of grace is founded upon the reality of the Trinity. This doctrine underpins redemption. For example, only the Father can send the Son. Only the Son can die for us to bestow grace on sinners, and only the Holy Spirit can apply the benefits of redemption to us.

Within redemption, ‘the Father is the Source, the Son the Redemptive Mediator and the Spirit the Divine Applier of life and grace’ (Griffiths).

‘Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ is the right question, because forgiveness requires someone with the authority to forgive.

## **How is your theological nose?**

Our Reformers laboured to define that the Father, Son and Spirit were separate persons. So, the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit etc. But they are also not three God’s. They are one in substance (or being).

Athanasius was the powerhouse who nailed this in the Athanasian Creed; one of three Creeds Anglicans have. This creed is not for the faint hearted as it is hard-hitting, uncompromising and long! However, like all good liturgy it is balanced, worded with laser precision, and designed to demonstrate the limits of orthodoxy, even if you can’t comprehend everything. Think of it like your instructions from the embassy for travel in foreign countries. You might not understand why the British Embassy tell you to avoid the north of the city at night. But if the embassy warns you about this, the sensible traveller won’t go there. So, it is with the warnings of the Athanasian Creed. The Athanasian Creed rejected the idea of three gods.

## **Article II – *Of Christ the Son of God***

The earliest commentator on the articles, Rogers, summarised the teaching as:

1. Christ is very God
2. Christ is very man
3. Christ is God and man in one person
4. Christ is the Saviour of mankind.

‘Son of God’ (as stated in the Article’s title)



The New Testament teaches that Christ's sonship is not limited purely to the incarnation and refers to his eternal sonship. Christ's full title, 'Son of God' is part of his divinity. 'It is a serious error to limit our Lord's sonship to the incarnation even if we hold to his eternity as the Word' (Griffiths.)

'The Son, which is the Word...'

The title Word is used John 1:1, with John's bold statement that the Word was God.

To deny this is to miss the heart of Christianity and to be outside of the bounds of Christianity. Such error leaves us in a howling wasteland where we cannot make sense of why Jesus was crucified.

Jesus was condemned because he claimed sonship (Matthew 26:63). It was not merely a claim to be the Messiah, but to deity (John 8:58-59). Look at the statement for which they stone him. 'I AM' seems an odd trigger if we don't see Christ was alluding to the name of God which was revealed to Moses (Exodus 3:14).

### **Do I detect Arius?**

'Begotten from everlasting of the father'

Begotten establishes a priority of order in the Father-Son relationship, with the Father sending the Son, but guards against a superiority of nature. This begetting is not a moment in time, but a continual act. There was not a time when the Father was not the Father and the Son was not the Son. The heretic Arius said that Christ was not 'of one substance with the Father.' The Arians were happy for Jesus to be above humans, but not to place him as equal with the Father. Let the matter be put to bed by seeing that 'in Christ all the fulness of the deity lives in bodily form' (Colossians 2:9).

'very and eternal God'

Modern day Arians are frequently found. They include the cults who say that they honour Jesus, but when you drill down into their doctrine, the Jesus they believe in is lesser to the Father. This includes Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons.

Christ is not 50% human and 50% God. He is not a lower form of God or man. Christ is 100% God and 100% man: 'very God and very man'. Because they are joined together in 'one person', Scripture is content to speak of 'the blood of God' (Acts 20:28). What is true of one of the natures becomes true of the one person, Christ. We also see the reality of Christ's humanity in saying that they 'crucified the Lord of glory' (1 Corinthians 2:8).

'who truly suffered'

Docetism held that Christ only appeared to be human and therefore only appeared to suffer. This is wrong. He was 'crucified, dead and buried' (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). This was 'to reconcile his Father to us, and to be a sacrifice...' A fuller doctrine of the atonement is given in Articles XV and XXXI. Without the death of Christ, we have no salvation. We will



see that the Anglican understanding of atonement is evangelical. But for now, we just notice that ‘the person gives efficacy to the work’ (Griffiths).

### **We are not ashamed as Anglicans to speak of God’s wrath**

‘reconcile his Father to us’

‘By making a satisfactory atonement for our disobedience he removed the Father’s anger’ (Gerald Bray.) So the Articles are happy for us to sing, ‘the wrath of God was satisfied’, despite some church leaders wanting to change ‘wrath’ to ‘love.’

### **Don’t cross your fingers for Article III – *Of his going down into hell***

Ephesians 4:7-10 speaks of Christ’s descent but does not elaborate upon where He descended to and could be taken as describing the incarnation.

In Acts 2:31, Peter says that David foresaw that Christ was not ‘abandoned to *hades*’. But Peter does not explain what he means.

Descending to the dead is mentioned in the Apostle’s Creed and descending to hell in the Athanasian.

The English word hell is used to mean two things. Firstly, the Greek *hades* meaning, ‘place of the dead.’ Secondly, *gehenna*, which describes the place reserved for the ungodly after the judgement (‘*gehenna* where the fire never goes out’ Mark 9:43).

By not explaining which understanding is intended, the Article leaves the matter open.

Possible meanings:

1. Calvin believed the soul of Christ went to the place of punishment, and there he suffered ‘the dreadful torments of a person condemned and irretrievably lost.’ This implies he descended to hell (*gehenna*).
2. Others identify his descent simply with the fact ‘he was buried.’ However, the article distinguishes between burial and descent so it cannot be expressing this.
3. He went to the place of the dead (*hades*) but not to suffer, or offer redemption to the ungodly Spirits, but to make ‘proclamation’ (1 Peter 3:18) of his victory in all the earth. We need to be careful not to go beyond what is written and certainly not to stray into the doctrine of Rome.

### **Articles IV is self-explanatory! – *Of his resurrection***

### **Article V – *Of the Holy Ghost***

You will already be noticing that the Spirit is ‘of one substance’ and ‘very and eternal God.’

This Article speaks of:

1. The fact of the Holy Spirit
2. The procession of the Holy Spirit
3. The equality of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son



#### 4. The Godhead of the Holy Spirit.

The deity of the Son was settled at the Council of Nicea (325) and the deity of the Spirit at Constantinople (381). At the Council of Chalcedon (451) the doctrine of the Spirit was fully established as we have it now. These councils were only articulating the teaching of the Bible.<sup>1</sup>

‘The Holy Spirit is at once the personal life of God and the ‘Executive of the Godhead’ in relation to man, and however difficult may be the conception of the Holy Spirit within the godhead it (*sic*) can never be disregarded without spiritual loss’ (Griffiths). The cults that deny the Spirit in these terms have no understanding or experience of being born again.

The Eastern Orthodox Church will not accept the phrase ‘and the Son’. This was instrumental in them splitting from the Roman Church of the West. But He (Spirit) is called ‘the Spirit of Jesus’ in Acts 16:7. Also in John 20:22 the Spirit is bestowed by the Son on the Apostles. Theologians have said that if the West dropped ‘and the Son’ it might be seen as denying or questioning the Son’s consubstantiality with the Father!

It is also the presence and reality of the Spirit in the Christian community which makes this article so important.

#### **Questions to close:**

Should everything be rejected that comes with the label of Roman Catholic? Why or why not?

Anglicanism was formed in controversy. Do you find this unsettling or reassuring?

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

#### **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)

McGrath, A.E. (1998) *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*

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

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<sup>1</sup> Nicea only mentioned the Spirit but said nothing about him in its 325 iteration. The person of the Spirit was overshadowed by the debate about the Son. Later versions said, ‘the Lord the giver of life etc.’